

Utilizing her creative spirit

By **SUZANNE KYDLAND**
Of The Gazette Staff

Barb Giovetti likes to make something out of nothing.

Within the past year, she's had lots of practice making "something out of nothing" by revamping the look of a special unit that houses 32 residents at St. John's Lutheran Home in Billings.

As a licensed practicing nurse who graduated from what was Billings Vo-Tech, Giovetti has been caring for elderly patients at St. John's for the past 16 years.

For the last five of those years, she's been in the Dementia Care Unit as the coordinator, where she supervises more than 20 people. She does everything from filling in for floor nurses to caring for people who are often disoriented to "filling out lots and lots of government paperwork," she said in a recent interview.

"This is such a blessing for me to do. I have supportive leaders, and I'm able to be creative. My staff is wonderful. And it's these beautiful, elderly people that never ever stop giving to me," Giovetti said.

Within the last year, she's been busy — sponge painting walls, applying decorative borders, switching out bedspreads and stenciling designs on headboards to give each resident's room a different atmosphere.

"Most of them don't know how to find their rooms, and they're hardly there at all during the day. They spend a great deal of time in the living areas," Giovetti said. "But, when they are there, their rooms are really a landmark spot for them."

She began her projects about the same time St. John's began a form of care called "edenizing," which is a new philosophy for looking after the elderly. The Eden Alternative was pioneered at a New York nursing home by medical director Dr. William Thomas. It stresses minimizing loneliness, helplessness and boredom by enlivening homes — essentially making them more like a real home — with pets, plants and children.

"Edenizing is about having residents help take care of the animals, the garden, nurture things," she said. "I'll ask someone, 'Could you brush my hair?' They love to do things for other people."

Giovetti occasionally stops to pat a dog's head or step over a cat as she explains that they've knocked out a room or two to allow for a kitchen and laundry area. Both are open at all times for those who want to use them.

She's spent money here and there at local discount stores, buying

knickknacks — anything from colorful salt and pepper shakers to old magazines — to set around and make the rooms more homey.

But her finest creations so far are the resident rooms that no longer have the institutional look that is associated with nursing homes. Since there are more than 20 rooms, Giovetti has just been doing one at a time and estimates she's nearly one-third of the way through.

She finds it easier when the room is vacant because there's less furniture and she can paint more quickly. But, in occupied rooms, she'll ask the resident a color choice and get the individual's opinion of her previous work.

"Often when I'm painting a room, I think of that person while I'm doing it," she said. "And, if it comes out beautifully, it's because that person is beautiful."

Giovetti's talents aren't limited to her job. If anything, her hobby of crafting has been instilled from her life outside of St. John's. She continuously pages through magazines for ideas and loves to put together gift baskets and redo furniture. Recently, she's also learned how to make her own paper.

Decorating the house she shares with her husband, Dan Smith, is another constant process.

"It's so funky," Giovetti said. "The house was my husband's grandparents' house."

"We initially tore it down because our household was expanding. We knew we would need more room than just an addition on the house. Our children were having children, and they would come stay



Gazette photo/BOB ZELLAR

Barb Giovetti sits at home surrounded by her many craft projects.

with us."

Upcoming projects for Giovetti include tackling the hallways throughout the unit and painting an old dresser for a St. John's fundraising auction planned for 2000.

As busy as she is, Giovetti never

seems to forget her main objective: the elderly residents.

"If I can just make someone laugh or smile it makes me feel so good," she said. "It's exciting to be able to do the things you feel are good and needed."