

Making a Difference: Hospice of Larimer County

by Sandy Perlic

This year, more than 560,000 Americans suffering from progressive illnesses such as cancer will face the reality that their death will not be “someday,” but “someday soon.” For these individuals and their loved ones, it can be a time of fear, introspection, worry, and grief. Many families will turn to hospice, a concept of care which emphasizes enhancing the individual's quality of life during the time they have remaining. Hospice provides physical, emotional and spiritual care to dying patients and their families. To ensure their comfort, patients often stay in the familiar surroundings of their own home.

Hospice of Larimer County (HLC) provides this care to local patients. “Honoring every moment of life, Hospice of Larimer County provides specialized, compassionate care for anyone affected by an advanced medical condition and support to those who are grieving,” said Sarah Van Etten, HLC's director of volunteer services. Their program provides on-call, around-the-clock nursing care with physician oversight, medical equipment and supplies, inpatient care, and personal patient care. Counseling, spiritual and grief support, and other therapies are also offered.

This non-profit organization could not fulfill its mission, however, without the help of more than 200 volunteers who devote their time and energy to assisting patients and their families. “Volunteers are critical members of the patient/family care team,” Van Etten said. “They are so important that Medicare requires that 5% of all patient care hours are served by volunteers. Volunteers assist in all aspects of the organization from patient and client interaction to behind-the-scenes support. They not only improve and increase the services provided to patients and families, but also support and increase the efficiency of the HLC staff.”

MaryAnn Randels has volunteered with HLC since shortly after the death of her own mother six years ago. The experience she and her family had with hospice care affected her profoundly. “They were a godsend, for her and for us,” she said. “I've come to the realization that people don't know how to die - they only know how to live. They made it possible for her to not be afraid.” Randels not only appreciated the fact that the people from hospice were totally supportive of her mother, but that everyone else received the support they needed as well. “She was always the focus, but we were all treated as if we were as important as the patient,” she recalled. Randels found it a rather natural progression to volunteer with hospice after her mother passed away. “I totally believe in their philosophy in dying, in living, and in general how people interact with each other.”

Jennifer Geraci was drawn to volunteer with HLC for similar reasons. After experiencing hospice care through the deaths of her grandmother and mother, she said, “It made a huge impression on me.” In the two years she had to prepare for her mother's death, she did a lot of reading on hospice philosophy and met with different people in hospice and found it “amazing.” “Our culture is so ill-equipped to deal with death and grief. I think it brings up a lot of fears about our own mortality. And the whole process can be really scary – the dying process. No one wants to think about that.”

Unlike many in our society, Geraci and Randels are not uncomfortable with death or dying. They have chosen to spend many of their volunteer hours with patient care, visiting patients in their homes or care facilities. Geraci said, “I mainly provide companionship. I play cards with them, I talk to them, I listen to them.” Randels has been invited by several of her

patient's families to be present at the patient's death. She feels honored "to be able to escort, in a way, from living to dying." Geraci agrees that serving others nearing the end of their lives is an honor: "Being able to be with people in a very intimate way at a time that is so significant is an amazing privilege."

Dealing with patients and their families at this time can be demanding, which is why volunteers serving in these areas complete 20 hours of training to prepare them for their role. Loss is inevitable in hospice: friendships are made, and friendships are lost. Randels said, "One of the ways I deal with it is to leave each visit as if it were the last. Every single time. Nothing left unsaid. Nothing left undone." She continued: "The other thing I do is I have a section in my yard that I've turned into my own little personal memory garden. I plant a miniature rose for every one of my patient's that's passed away. It's my way of carrying on their legacy."

Although both Geraci and Randels particularly enjoy interacting with patients and their families, they often help out in other ways, including manning the front desk or planning and setting-up for special events. Indeed, there are many other volunteer opportunities that do not involve dealing directly with patients. Helping out with special events or working in the library are just some of the ways volunteers contribute to hospice. Many professionals donate services such as legal work, massage therapy, and photography. According to Van Etten, "HLC is committed to involving the community through volunteerism. We are committed to matching individuals with the volunteer role that will be the best fit for their individual talents and interests." Most opportunities involve a time commitment of two to three hours per week.

The hours spent assisting with HLC's needs are very rewarding for volunteers like Randels and Geraci. Although many volunteers like Geraci have full-time jobs, finding a few hours to assist hospice in helping people deal with the myriad of issues that surround the end of life has been very worthwhile for them. Geraci sums up her feelings about volunteering with HLC by saying: "I can't really think of anything more important I could do with my life." Most volunteers would agree.

What You Can Do:

To volunteer with HLC, call the volunteer office at 292-2378.

Monetary donations may be made online at www.hlchospice.org, or checks may be mailed to:

Hospice of Larimer County
305 Carpenter Road
Fort Collins, CO 80525

To explore other volunteer opportunities with non-profit agencies throughout Larimer County, contact the United Way Volunteer Center by dialing 2-1-1 (or 407-7066) or visit www.uwaylc.org.

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