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JULY 15, 2012

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SUNDAY



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"When you enter a family when they believe a person is dying, it's such a special time in their lives. ... It's a privilege to be there."

FAMILIES FIND SOLACE IN STRANGERS' LOVE

Compassion, care leading credentials for hospice volunteers

BY RACHEL WEAVER

In a homey room in Forbes Hospice, Lisa Fischetti watched her mother, Lia DiPietro, sleep.

DiPietro, 80, had become a patient in the Bloomfield facility three days earlier. She was coping with complications from multiple myeloma, a cancer that starts in the white blood cells, which are responsible for producing antibodies.

Family and friends had visited before this quiet, mid-morning moment. Then, Fishcetti's worry

eased into a smile when volunteers Esther Ryan and Phyllis Maher arrived with Maher's trained therapy dogs, Monroe and Taj. Ryan slipped a bracelet of rosary beads over DiPietro's slim wrist.

DiPietro died on Friday night.

Hospice not only made her mother comfortable, but put her family at ease, Fischetti said on Saturday.

"Ultimately, she had the comforts of home, but we didn't have to provide for her," she said. "We were able to really enjoy whatever final time we

had with our mom."

Administrators in hospices across Western Pennsylvania agree that the work of patient care volunteers such as Ryan and Maher, who visit clients and provide caregiver respite, is invaluable. Most say they need many more.

"My dream is to have one in every small town," said April Wolfe, volunteer coordinator at Three Rivers Hospice in North Versailles, whose 45 volunteers visit patients in eight counties.

HOSPICE • A6

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FAMILIES FIND SOLACE IN STRANGERS' LOVE

HOSPICE • FROM A1

The word hospice comes from the Latin word *hospes*, meaning to host a guest or stranger. Typically, physicians, nurses, social workers, bereavement counselors and volunteers address the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the patient and his or her family. The team focuses on comfort and symptom management when curative treatment no longer is an option.

Western Pennsylvania has nearly 40 hospices.

For volunteers, compassion is the leading credential, said Betsy Swager, director of support services at Bethany Hospice in Green Tree, whose 25 volunteers work in a 40-mile radius.

"We are lucky that we have volunteers who will travel," she said.

Attracting volunteers to a field dealing with death can be a challenge, hospice administrators say, and some volunteers acknowledge initial apprehension. Yet those who participate say the rewards far outweigh any concerns.

"It's life-enriching, even though you're dealing with the end of life," said Maher, 59, of Murrysville.

Ryan, 70, of Blawnox describes it as "almost like a calling."

"I don't have a problem with death," she said. "My faith tells me that when we die, we go to a better place and are no longer suffering."

Peace of mind

Medical professionals often refer people for hospice care when their diagnoses give them six months or fewer to live. Patients might get the care in hospices, nursing homes or their own homes.

Karen Cammarata, nurse practitioner at Family Hospice and Palliative Care in Mt. Lebanon, said the companionship that volunteers provide helps patients emotionally and physically.

"They provide a distraction, and we see symptoms much better-managed—pain, nausea, depression are all relieved through the volunteer work," she said.

Whether giving a caregiver a few hours to run errands or lending a friendly ear, volunteers provide families with much-needed peace of mind.

"I think of myself as a neighbor who stops in for a visit," said Marge Meighan, 59, of North Versailles, a Three Rivers Hospice volunteer. "Just like everything in your own life, you don't want to be alone."

She recalls one patient who expressed a fear of dying.

"He would ask me, 'What do you think it's like?' I asked, 'What do you think?' then just listened. You're like a sounding board, letting someone verbalize their concern," Meighan said.

Mike Kalogeras, 65, of Bethel Park found that his work as a volunteer with **Family Hospice and Palliative Care** helped him cope with his grief when his wife of 40 years, Beth, died from cancer last year.

The job can surprise you, Kalogeras said, recalling a 99-year-old patient who kept asking if he was an insurance salesman.

"I finally realized he was playing a joke that his family was after an insurance policy," Kalogeras said. "I thought that was clever."

Nancy Gannon, 75, of Mt. Lebanon, a Family Hospice and Palliative Care volunteer of 27 years, said each patient leaves "an indelible mark." She remembers Charlie, a baby born with brain complications. She watched his parents come to grips with his diagnosis and eventual death.

"Most people think it's very sad or morbid. It's really not," she said. "When you enter a family when they believe a person is dying, it's such a special time in their lives. It's the biggest crisis in their life. It's a privilege to be there."

Marv Good, 58, of Mt. Lebanon, a Family Hospice and Palliative Care volunteer whose son survived childhood cancer, knew her experience would help her in this line of work. She has worked with dementia patients and said she enjoys trying to tap into memories they might retain of Pittsburgh years ago or their childhoods.

"Sometimes we have the same conversations every five minutes, but that's OK because they're engaged," she said.

Nicole Barczak, 19, a Bethany Hospice volunteer and nursing student from Bloomfield, said even simple acts, such as moistening a person's lips or wiping their forehead, can help a patient's sense of self-actualization.

"If I can change a person's day or experience or make them comfortable by putting a pillow in the right spot or noticing something is not right, that makes my day," she said.

'It's been life-altering'

Some volunteers put unique spins on how they aid patients.

Ed Washburn, 63, of Delmont and baker **Nancy Combos, 53, of Irwin** provide birthday cakes and balloons to patients in Excelsa Health Hospice.

A five-year hospice volunteer, Washburn spent time with about a dozen clients before their deaths.

"I've met World War II vets who have given me amazing stories," he said.

Some of the stories surprise family members who had not heard them, he said.

Some patients aren't able to talk.

"You just go and sit and give the caregiver a break," he said.

Judy Graham, a volunteer for 30 years, uses her musical talent to connect with patients through Excelsa Hospice. Graham and other volunteers sing everything from

Get involved

Hospice volunteers are needed in a number of capacities, including patient visits and clerical work. To find out more, contact:

- Bethany Hospice, Six Parkway Center, Suite 100, 875 Greentree Road, Green Tree; 412-921-2209.
- Three Rivers Hospice, 1195 Jacks Run Road, North Versailles; 1-800-282-0306.
- Forbes Hospice, West Penn Hospital, 4800 Friendship Ave., Bloomfield; 412-325-7200.
- Family Hospice and Palliative Care, 50 Mof-fett St., Mt. Lebanon and sites in Manchester, Forest Hills, Hermitage and Lawrenceville; 412-572-8806.

hymns to show tunes. "It's been life-altering just to be part of it," said Graham, 69, of New Alexandria.

Maier brings her trained Labrador retrievers to visit patients in Forbes Hospice and said some unresponsive patients perk up when the dogs are around.

"They have a very gentle, comforting presence," Maier said.

Bethany Hospice volunteer **Betty Jean Maier, 79, of Whitehall** brings Colby, an Australian shepherd, and Heidi, a golden retriever, on visits. She recalls one man who was reluctant to pet the dogs. Maier discovered that he had been a breeder and missed his own dogs. By the next visit, the man was feeding Colby and Heidi treats.

"If you don't give up, you do see a change," she said.

Many volunteers compare losing a patient with the death of a family member.

Ralph Vitt, 75, of Green Tree, a Bethany Hospice volunteer, attends funerals or wakes when he can.

"Whatever the families' beliefs are as closure for them works for me, too," he said.

Mike King, 45, of Turtle Creek lost his mother, Marcia, to a stroke last year. She had spent several days in Forbes Hospice.

Volunteers helped him bear the burden of carrying out his mother's final wishes, he said.

"I don't think I could ever find the words to properly express my gratitude," he said, fighting back tears. "When somebody takes their time to give so freely to a family they don't even know, who's going through that situation..."

"I've been a volunteer firefighter for 28 years. They're the heroes."

Staff writer Alex Nixon contributed to this report. Rachel Weaver is a staff writer for Trib Total Media. She can be reached at 412-320-7948 or rweaver@tribweb.com.