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Rafael Sciuolo, CEO of Family Hospice and Palliative Care in Mt. Lebanon, helped design the gardens around the facility. He also arranged to have therapy dog Ivan, a golden retriever, live at the hospice. "He's a unifying force," says Mr. Sciuolo of Ivan. "He calms patients."

Serene setting

At a Mt. Lebanon hospice, a carefully designed garden and therapy dog bring solace to patients

By Susan Banks
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Gardeners already know that there are few more peaceful places than a garden. Dog owners know the calm that can be found in the touch of a soft ear and fuzzy body.

Rafael Sciuolo, president and CEO of Family Hospice and Palliative Care, knows both things firsthand, and used those ideas when re-working the grounds around the Center for Compassionate Care. The former orphanage tucked in the tranquil community of Mt. Lebanon is now a place people can come for the last stage of their life's journey.

Mr. Sciuolo, a former Catholic monk, said his work with native Americans made him rethink the way Americans see the end of life. In the Navajo culture, death is embraced as part of life, and families gather near to help usher the loved one onward to their next journey, and nature is a large part of that.

"They got me to reflect on the natural," he says. "When death was imminent, they let it happen, surrounded by family."

It was then that he got involved in hospice care and has been working in the field, in some fashion, for the past 28 years.

Mr. Sciuolo, a Bloomfield native, returned here in 2001 when he took the job at the hospice. Happily, the job allowed him to be near his aging mother, who now lives with him.

The actual hospice beds are used by a small percentage of Family Hospice's



The courtyard garden of the Center for Compassionate Care in Mt. Lebanon is designed to create a peaceful atmosphere.



patients, as the vast majority of its clients in 11 Western Pennsylvania counties receive in-home care. The \$5 million renovation of the building and landscape are the culmination of a dream for Mr. Sciuolo. The building houses patients and staff, and every effort is made to make the hospice as homelike as possible, with comfortable furnishings — many selected by Mr. Sciuolo — artwork, drapes and

porches, complete with rocking chairs. After the completion of the interior, Mr. Sciuolo, who had recognized the potential of the property, began on the gardens. He called in Eric French from Eisler Landscapes, who did the design, and they started work. A courtyard garden was created around what was once the entrance to the orphanage. Clipped boxwood hedges surround old-fashioned

favorites such as hydrangeas, butterfly bush and clethra. Mr. French helped with the plant selections. "Eric was good. He knew the atmosphere I wanted to create," says Mr. Sciuolo. A fountain was installed, and benches placed around the building in quiet areas, making it inviting to stroll outside.

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At the Family Hospice in Mt. Lebanon, all patient rooms have French doors, allowing families to bring loved ones out into the courtyard garden where there are benches and a fountain.

Hospice garden creates serene setting

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While he recognized that families need some place to escape to, he also felt that patients needed access to the gardens, so he insisted that all patient rooms have French doors installed, allowing families to bring loved ones out into the garden, which may mean pushing an entire bed outdoors.

On another side of the building, close to the parking lot, there is a serenity garden surrounded by statues of the four seasons, again chosen by Mr. Sciullo.

Pots and urns planted by Mr. Sciullo, who is a gifted container designer and often gives talks on the subject, are peppered around the building.

Patients, families and employees use the outdoor spaces on a daily basis. On the day of our visit, a family member was sitting quietly under the shade of the mature oaks that front the property. Mr. Sciullo relates the story of another family member who mentioned how happy the garden made a sick relative.

There is seemingly nothing at the hospice that Mr. Sciullo hasn't had a hand in. But he felt that there was one element missing. A dog. A dog-lover himself, Mr. Sciullo spends many hours of his time in his own garden with his beloved Celeste. When he heard about New Hope Assistance Dogs, he made the connection, and Ivan, a golden



The courtyard garden was created around what was once the entrance to the orphanage.

retriever, recently came to live at the hospice.

"He's a unifying force," says Mr. Sciullo of the dog whose lush tail sweeps back and forth for every visitor.

"He calms patients," says Mr. Sciullo. "Dogs change the feeling in a room."

He helps employees, too, when the work becomes stressful. Everyone stops to pat him

and there is a list of people willing to help with bathroom breaks. Ivan is trained to go on command.

The biggest challenge Ivan faces, laughs Mr. Sciullo, is that everyone wants to feed him. Worrying that Ivan would quickly become overweight, Mr. Sciullo has limited treats to raw carrots.

Between the garden and Ivan,

patients are sure to find some type of solace.

There are days, admits Mr. Sciullo, that you can walk down the hall and sense tension. But not outside.

"Any family in the courtyard looks at peace."

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