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Tool kit helps you 'have the talk' about end-of-life planning

by Paul R. Kopenkosky | The Grand Rapids Press Tuesday August 19, 2008, 8:16 AM

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Press Photo/Lance Wynn

Making choices: Shown in her Northeast Grand Rapids home, June Hamersma, founding chairwoman of Hospice of Michigan Foundation, planned her end-of-life care.

When she closes her eyes a final time, June Hamersma plans to be surrounded with the brightly colored furnishings inside the ranch she and her husband, John, built 46 years ago.

At 79, the retired director of Calvin College's January Series is focused on life, with a well-read mind and a treadmill that keeps her trim.

Still, the Northeast Grand Rapids resident is a realist. She knows death is inevitable and wants her relatives to know in advance where she wants to die and who she wants to be in charge of her end-of-life care.

"I think I've got a good 20 years left in me yet," said Hamersma, founding chairwoman of Hospice of Michigan Foundation.

"I want to be here in my home, I want hospice nurses, not my family, taking care of me. I just want our children to be here and to love us, not to take care of us. They would in a heartbeat, but that shouldn't be their role."

Hamersma said she knows many people avoid planning for death, and she thinks that's a mistake.

Campaign goals

A statewide Hospice of Michigan promotional campaign called Have You Had the Talk? wants to replace their apprehension with a plan that decides in advance who they will rely on to make decisions when they can't.

Part of the campaign's goal is to raise \$1 million for patient care and spark plans for end-of-life care before a medical crisis arises.

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A Have You Had the Talk? toolkit is available for \$10. It includes a durable power of attorney directive, caregiver instructions, conditions for a do-not-resuscitate order and online end-of-life resources. To order one, call (888) 247-5701, or visit haveyouhadthetalk.com.

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Showing of documentary will raise funds for Hospice of Michigan.

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The campaign includes a 15-page \$10 toolkit that provides a durable power of attorney mandate, caregiver instructions and conditions for a do-not-resuscitate order. Call (888) 247-5701, or visit haveyouhadthetalk.com.

The toolkit asks six questions to determine what a person wants their end-of-life care to entail, such as their definition of a good death and the role they want friends and family to play in their dying.

Once completed, Hospice of Michigan advises storing it in an easy-to-find place, and even suggests the freezer as an odd, but easy-to-find spot. A well-marked file in a cabinet or on your desk serves the same purpose.

Film premiere

The project includes a documentary titled, "Except for Six" set to premiere at 6:30 p.m., Sept. 4 at Celebration Cinema North, 2121 Celebration Drive NE.

Hospice of Michigan is a statewide nonprofit that provides health-care services regardless of age, diagnosis or ability to pay to a daily average of 900 terminally ill people in nearly 60 counties throughout the Lower Peninsula.

The nonprofit provides hospice care in patients' homes, assisted-living centers, nursing homes and hospitals, and is one of 13 pediatric hospice providers in the country.

Naming the campaign with a question usually associated with sex or drugs is intended to stir curiosity and help people make decisions they'd rather postpone for some other time, said Marcie Hillary, vice president of resource development. Sometimes that's when a crisis happens and relatives are left to make decisions without any input from the patient.

"It's an uncomfortable talk to have, and that's part of the reason for doing this campaign," said Hillary. "They're helpful tips to start a conversation so they can go step by step."

The idea for the toolkit germinated while filming the documentary, "Except for Six."

"As we started embarking on a documentary with the filmmaker, it became apparent people don't have the talk," she said. "Those who have, it's made a big difference."

June Hamersma has seen the difference in her own family.

Difficult memory

She is still haunted by the memories of how her 98-year-old mother, Cecilia Bos, died 10 years ago in an area nursing home. She died in the early morning hours alone.

Her death is a stark contrast to how her brother, Carroll Bos, died from liver cancer years later in his home. The hospice nurse took care of his palliative needs so his family could focus on him.

The difference: He mapped out how he wanted to die.

"His death was so different from my mother's," said Hamersma. "He was never alone. A hospice nurse who greeted him for the first time got down on her knees, rubbed his arm and told him who she was. I've never seen a nurse do that before."

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