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A friend at the end of life

When there's no one else, Dona Reynolds is an "Abider" for the dying.

By Michael Vitez
Inquirer Staff Writer

ALLENTOWN - Nobody in Cedarbrook Nursing Home can get away from Dona Reynolds, not even the dying.

She hugs them. Sings to them. Kisses them. Prays with them.

If residents are just days, hours or minutes from death, she'll stroke their hair, hold their hand, tell them it's perfectly OK to head home to their Heavenly Father.

Reynolds, 73, is one of several volunteers in a new group at the nursing home known as the "Abiders." Their role is to comfort the dying. The idea is that nobody should die alone.

Since October, when she started, Reynolds has sat with 14 people - many of whom had nobody else - as they died in their nursing home beds.

"It's a comfort to me," she said, "to know I've done something good for somebody else at the last minute, when there's nobody else there."

Reynolds started coming to this 483-bed nursing home here two years ago, when her husband, Bob, moved in with advanced Alzheimer's. She's tried to bring joy to the living as well as comfort to the dying, becoming a friend and frequent visitor to scores of lonely and frail residents. More than 90 percent of Cedarbrook residents will eventually die there.

The abider role is growing around the country, but still relatively new.

A Lutheran pastor at a long-term-care facility in Wisconsin started the first Abider program in 1995. He took the name from the 24th chapter of Luke, in which two disciples, noting the hour is late, ask the resurrected Jesus to "abide with us," and from a 19th-century hymn, written from the author's deathbed, "Abide With Me."

Some nursing homes and hospices have started programs by that or other names. Samaritan Hospice in South Jersey, for instance, started its version, called Vigil Volunteers, this summer.

"We are hoping for great results," said Sally Cezo, with Samaritan volunteer services.

"One in four Americans die in a nursing home," said Joan Teno, a Brown University professor and physician who is an expert in end-of-life care.

"Many of those people are orphan elderly - no family that's close by. They don't have anybody who visits. So hospice and nursing home volunteers are fulfilling an important gap that family can't provide by being there."

'But I'm not ready to go'

Reynolds' first experience as an abider was with Sarah Miller, 79, who died Nov. 12. She sat with her for 11 hours. Afterward, Reynolds started a journal:

I held her hand, brushed her hair and rubbed her forehead. I would read and sing psalms to her. At one point, I took my glasses off and laid my cheek next to hers, as I sang and held her hand.

I spoke directly to her, telling her it was okay to go home. She was very peaceful. . . . I was so comforted to know I



MICHAEL VITEZ / For The Inquirer

Dona Reynolds, 72, spends several hours a day with her husband, Bob, 82, at Cedarbrook Nursing Home in Allentown and is a volunteer "Abider," who stays with patients as they die.

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I was still talking with Sarah when the nurse said, "Dona, she's gone." My automatic response was, "But I'm not ready to go." She told me that's okay, you can stay. I thank God that I could be with Sarah as she passed into glory. I look forward to being with others.

She had six children, including Kenny, who was born with brain damage.

He's had Alzheimer's now for six years. In November 2005, unable to care for him on her own any longer, she moved him into Cedarbrook.

She met Bob the other day in the hallway after lunch.

"Hi."

"No."

"Oh, quit pulling my leg," she said.

(A month earlier, her husband didn't know who she was and was nasty about it.)

"Who am I?" she asked again.

"Dona. My wife."

He smiled a playful smile. That was a good day. On Thursday, four times, he called Reynolds his mother. "He's going down fast," she said.

She tried to give him a banana.

"Don't you like bananas?"

"No."

"Yes, you do."

"Do I?"

Reynolds pushed Bob's wheelchair through the halls. She always wears a bow in her hair. She hugged a resident with Down syndrome.

"I love you, Billy," she gushed. "You're my guy."

She wheeled her husband into the room of a woman, 96, one of her favorites.

"How are you?" Reynolds asked.

"Well, I'm kicking," the woman said.

"Look who I brought to see you," she said, referring to her husband. "Lean over and give him a kiss on the cheek."

The woman couldn't lean much. Bob was hardly more limber. Reynolds got their chairs close. Each one bent forward.

The woman kissed Bob on the chin.

"How's that?" she asked.

"We made it," said Bob.

An amazing bond

Reynolds was holding the hand of Gladys Mack, 75, when she died at 3:45 a.m. Feb. 20. In her journal, she wrote:

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It amazes me how your spirit bonds with the resident you're abiding with. One seems to grow and get attached from the very first meeting. I love being able to help others in their time of need.

Reborn through the dying

For years, staff at Cedarbrook, a county nursing home where many residents are poor and without family, have been asking for an Abider program. They were too busy to stay with and comfort the dying but hated to leave them alone.

"Staff was frustrated," said Andrea Elwood, director of social services at Cedarbrook. "They find it difficult to step away."

When Cedarbrook decided to implement the Abider program, the volunteer coordinator asked Reynolds to consider it.

She took this as a sign.

Three years earlier, her son Kenny, then 46, who had cerebral palsy, died in a bus fire in Allentown. He was a passenger in his wheelchair when the bus engine burst into flames. Kenny was consumed by flames in six minutes, charred beyond recognition.

Others got off safely. Reynolds said Kenny made sure the bus driver helped them first. She calls him a hero.

But she was haunted by the image of how he died, with nobody to comfort him.

She wears a locket with his picture. She has found she can do for others now what nobody could do for her son.

"She has been reborn since working with the dying," said Barbara Bitros, of Life Choice Hospice, who trained Reynolds at Cedarbrook.

"She turned her tragic story into one of hope," Bitros added. "It changed her life because it gave her comfort in her time of profound grief."

'God chose me'

I had told Velda I wouldn't leave her until she decided to go home. Well, I left her at midnight for five minutes. When I came back, Velda was with the Lord. . . . I got down on the mat, looked Velda right in the face, pointed my finger at her and said, "You stinker! Here I thought you didn't want me out of sight and it turns out you were waiting for me to leave so you could go home."

I gave her . . . a kiss on the forehead. . . . I really grew to love her, she had a need for someone to be with her and God chose me.

- After the death of Velda Roth, with whom Reynolds sat for seven hours, on March 5.

Dona Reynolds talks on video about comforting the dying at <http://go.philly.com/abider>

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