

Hospice helpers ease final journey

Column by Jack Hicks

Thanks to some special people, Ruth Bezold got to take a sentimental journey.

A hospice patient, Bezold, 85, has been at the Highlands in Fort Thomas for four years. Her previous home, in the California area of Campbell County, has never been far from her mind.

This summer, she was treated to a "road trip" by her hospice caregiver, Marilyn McElwee, who drove her to visit family members and sites from her past.

"I got to see so many people - all my relatives," said Bezold, a former office worker for McAlpin's department stores.

Getting to leave a care facility for such a sojourn is rare for a hospice patient, but the attention of McElwee and others like her given to critically ill people is much the norm.

November is National Hospice Month, and an opportunity for organizations such as Hospice of the Bluegrass-Northern Kentucky to salute the nearly 90 volunteer caregivers affiliated with the agency.

"Volunteers are a vital part of our organization, and we wouldn't be able to offer the quality of care that we do without them," said Dare Miller, Hospice of the Bluegrass development officer.

Hospice came to this country from England in the 1970s, as an extended level of care for those who aren't going to get well. The aim is that no one dies in pain or alone, Miller said. "We attempt to fulfill as many of the patients' wishes as possible, until the end of their lives."

Hospice of the Bluegrass, headquartered in Lexington, has a unit at St. Luke Hospital East and serves patients in a number of area nursing homes. The non-profit organization provides services to an average of 125 people per day, nearly 700 a year, Miller said. Some patients are in hospice only briefly, sometimes termed "the 11th hour," when death is near. Others have been under hospice care for months.

As for the volunteers, it takes a special dedication to spend time with someone who is terminally ill. At the hospice at St. Elizabeth Medical Center in Edgewood, a biblical verse declares: "as a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you."

Sometimes it's listening, as the patient talks about family and other matters of importance to them. If no words are spoken, "just being there" is also important, as another human being reaches the end of their life, said McElwee of Union, a nine-year hospice volunteer.

Ralph Aust of Fort Thomas, spent many hours with his wife, Betty, during her terminal illness, and the experience prompted him to become a hospice volunteer. Aust, 85, tries to do a little research about the patient's lifestyle, to provide conversation topics, if conversation is desired. "I just play it by ear."

In one case Aust spent four months listening to a former long-distance trucker recall his career. The man also liked John Wayne movies. Aust would find one on TV, and they would watch it together.

Volunteers administer no medicine. "We are there as a companion ... a friend," Aust said.

Volunteers help in other ways. Some provide transportation for trips to the doctor and such, and there is also the Comfort Club.

About 15 belong, producing items such as quilts, pillows and bibs for the patients.

Kathy Hein of Florence, said the club meets weekly and has turned out more than 1,300 such items.

Carolyn J. Condren, coordinator of volunteer services for the Hospice of the Bluegrass, says it takes a compassionate temperament to work with people who are terminally ill, and each volunteer goes through training sessions before being assigned to a patient.

McElwee has worked with more than 50 patients during her volunteer time, and the emotional wounds can't be denied when someone passes. She said she always tries to attend funerals, even when she has barely gotten to know the person.

She has come to know Ruth Bezold well, and their day trip was a delight for both patient and the caregiver. While she was unable to get in and out of the automobile with ease, family members came to the vehicle for individual and group visits, and lined up for photos.

"We had fun, oh, didn't we," Bezold said.

The route took them past St. Peter and Paul Church, where she worshiped and attended annual dinners. It meant much to her to drive by the statue of the Virgin Mary in the church yard, and McElwee even treated her at a McDonald's drive-through, she said.

If the Lord wills it, they will be able to repeat the trip. They already are talking about it.

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