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### Hospice workers go the extra mile to give clients a chance to live in the moment

By Jonathan Devin, Memphis Commercial Appeal

Tuesday, June 30, 2009

Some hospice workers in Memphis have found that there are many ways to give gifts to patient nearing their final days, and in doing so, bring moments of joy even as the moments grow few.

Tori Smitherman, a social worker with Crossroads Hospice in Memphis, said giving special moments to her patients spreads joy in many ways.



Jim Weber/The Commercial Appeal

Gladys Jones, who has battled cancer for years, was surprised when Crossroads Hospice social worker Tori Smitherman organized a garden update at her Southeast Memphis home. Volunteers helped spice up the garden with new plants and landscaping touches.



Gladys Jones has named many of the small statues in her rock garden. She has collected them since she built the garden some six years ago.

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"To me it shows them that people care about them, that people are listening to them," Smitherman said. "Sometimes I think it rewards us as staff more than it does the patient."

Smitherman and her team recently surprised one patient, Gladys Jones, 73, of Southeast Mem with a garden makeover.

"When we hear someone like Miss Gladys was saying that she loves to garden, but she's just r able to, we thought we'd help her get that done."

Smitherman made a request for the gift to her supervisor, who approved it. Another staff memb master gardener, surveyed Jones' front yard and made recommendations for types of plants to

Then on May 21, the Crossroads crew showed up in force and replanted Jones' garden while J herself planted some pots.

"We had eight or nine members of our staff here, and we brought some pots for (Jones) to be a at the table and work, even though she didn't do a good job of sitting at the table," said Smither "She couldn't stand not being a part of it."

Jones has lived with cancer of the pelvis for several years. Last summer, after a final round of chemotherapy, her doctors said they could do no more.

"They released me in August and told me to go home and take it easy until the Lord carries me home," said Jones. "I've made it this far."

Jones said she is not often in pain, but that the cancer exhausts her. She is no longer able to go to church or to work in her garden, which includes a large bed in the front yard and two brick planters which line the porch.

Jones chose to have the beds lined with pebbles, which remind her of the mountains near her hometown of Cleveland, Tenn. She also wanted purple flowers to remind her of a pot full of purple and-white flowers that gave her hope as she underwent 38 days of radiation.

Now the garden is filled with purple petunias, pink yarrow, red coleus, purple heart and Easter lilies. Jones added crosses and figurines.

"Just seeing the look on her face when we showed up with all those flowers was just priceless," said Smitherman.

Smitherman explained that Crossroads tries to give a special gift to each patient who has been at the hospice for more than 30 days. The hospice budgets for the gifts, but Smitherman said staff often get into the spirit and donate their own money.

In early June, another patient, Gloria Minniefield, who loved shopping for shoes was surprised by a selection of 30 or more pairs of new shoes from Payless Shoe Source and was allowed to keep the ones she liked. Minniefield passed away earlier this month.

Her social worker, Julie Beaty, said that was a day when Minniefield got to think about life, not death.

"She was sitting up in bed and she said, 'Oh my gosh, I can't believe you brought all these shoes,'" said Beaty.

"In the elderly population, a large number of people have no friends left," explained Donna Kirkman, director of quality improvement and staff development for Unity Hospice Care. "It helps a lot when they have contacts on the outside who are not home health aides or nurses or doctors; they are family members."

Kirkman said Unity focuses on providing trained volunteers to spend time with patients and offer them the gift of companionship. Volunteers visit patients, call them, and also write cards and letters to them to provide a sense of community.

And when matters of dignity are involved, Kirkman said, her staff and volunteers always come through.

"In the past we got together and paid to bury a patient," said Kirkman. "There was no family and no burial policy. That was a very disturbing situation. There was a distant relative, but they were financially not well off, so we did some negotiating with a funeral home, and lots of people went to the funeral."

Dan Rojcewicz, volunteer coordinator for Amedisys Hospice, said that what they do amounts to offering relief.

"A lot of what we're doing is relieving suffering -- their physical suffering, emotional suffering and spiritual suffering," said Rojcewski. "Our volunteers encourage (patients) to tell their life stories."

Gift-giving to patients at Amedisys is informal, but Rojcewski recalled a patient last summer with advanced Parkinson's disease who was unable to build model airplanes anymore. The patient's volunteer bought model airplanes for him and put them together.

Sometimes, however, a patient's wishes can't be bought.

Claudia Forrest, chaplain for Methodist Alliance Hospice, said that in February she was able to provide a gift that a patient had waited over half a century to receive.

"It was her 56th wedding anniversary and the patient told her husband that what she would really want was to renew their wedding vows, because they had been married before a Justice of the Peace," said Forrest.

"So they asked me to do that and we had a service in their home," Forrest continued. "They invited their families and even people out of town."

One family member in Texas listened on the phone.

After Forrest presided over the ceremony, the patient received a certificate, a candle and 56 long-stemmed roses, a gift from her husband.

Two weeks later, the patient died.

"It brought a lot of joy and laughter and memories," said Forrest. "Her dream to be married by a minister was fulfilled. That was her wish -- after 56 years, that was still her wish and she got it."

"That day she was truly living in the present, living in that moment, and enjoying it."

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Posted by **peggyisonagain** on June 30, 2009 at 6:11 a.m.

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Hospice care is such a wonderful, wonderful ministry. Some people exit or transition with doubt, regrets, unfinished business, worry, and pain. It must be a breath of fresh air to transition happily, smiling, and waving goodbye. None of us can foretell the manner in which we'll leave here, but when I have a terminal illness, I don't want heroic measures to be taken to keep me around and prolong an inevitable. I'm prepared and ready to board the train bound for Glory. Since we don't know which days are our last ones, 'every day should be a day of thanksgiving' and the present day should be enjoyed as a gift from God above.

Posted by **rikki** on June 30, 2009 at 6:29 a.m.

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Ditto Peggy.

Posted by **mikeswife** on June 30, 2009 at 8:10 a.m.

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What a wonderful story and an equally wonderful post, Peggy!

Posted by **Essence** on June 30, 2009 at 9:11 a.m.

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God Bless.

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