

At the end of life, lessons for living, and dying

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HUDSON - Bruce McCart had planned to begin his goodbye a little differently.

"I was going to use a joke," he said. "Like, 'Ever since I was a little boy, I knew I was going to be like this. Dead and everything.'"

Then he talked it over with his wife, Janie.

McCart, 59, started his videotaped farewell with a quote from Ecclesiastes: "To every thing there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven."

On Wednesday morning, McCart sat down in front of a videocamera and became the first Hernando-Pasco Hospice patient to participate in the Legacy Program. The program was created to help hospice patients say a meaningful goodbye to loved ones, and to talk about the moments that shaped their lives.

After each interview, hospice staff members and volunteers will make DVDs to distribute to family members.

McCart was an obvious choice to pioneer the program. The longtime assistant principal of Hudson High School shaped thousands of Pasco County students over the decades. Not long after he retired, he learned he had terminal cancer. In February 2004, doctors gave him six to eight months to live.

"I've never felt as sick as they say I am," McCart said. "The most important thing I can think of is, if you're sick, don't act like it."

During his interview, McCart offered plenty of sage advice for living - and dying. He was also quick to offer suggestions for future Legacy Program interviews.

"They need to spend time thinking about this," McCart told his interviewer, hospice volunteer program specialist Becky Bennett, after they finished. "That was healing to me."

The Legacy Program will be provided at no cost to the patient or family, and is funded in part by a donation from the Rotary Club of New Port Richey. The hospice plans to do 50 interviews this year.

Hospice staffers hope the program will help families and friends of patients come to terms with their loved ones' deaths, and find comfort in their final words.

They also hope Legacy will help hospice patients by reducing feelings of loss and isolation, emphasizing positive aspects of their lives, and relieving their fears of not leaving their families with anything.

"It leaves some kind of history for the remaining family," said McCart's younger brother, Craig, who also serves as a community service director for the Rotary Club of New Port Richey.

During his nearly two-hour interview, McCart created a mini oral history of his life. He reminisced about everything from

childhood illness and a trip to his grandparents' village in Ireland to his first bicycle - a green Schwinn -- and meeting his second wife, Janie.

"Janie, to me, has been the best thing that ever happened," McCart said. "I never experienced love before. I have since Janie."

He talked about his children and his four grandchildren, and all of the support he's found in the community as he faces death.

"I'm reaping what I sow," McCart said. "I've loved. I've never hated anybody. I think, because of that, I'm now getting paid back."

As the crew packed up the camera, he offered to keep helping the hospice with training for the Legacy Program.

He sat, cane in hand, and said thank you. Then, with an easy laugh, he protested:

"I have other stories that I didn't tell!"

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