

Morning Sentinel

SMALL BOOK WITH A BIG HEART Richard Russo joins other authors to tell true-life stories of hospice

KENNEBEC JOURNAL *Morning Sentinel*

03/23/2008

FROM MORNING SENTINEL STAFF

One June day in 2006, Pulitzer-prize winning author Richard Russo of Camden made an unexpected stop at Hospice Volunteers of the Waterville Area.

He came with his long-time friend and racquetball partner, Leon "Lee" Duff of Waterville.

"We became friends way back; we kept in touch," said Duff, 72, who in 2001 retired as superintendent of Union school district 52. Duff currently is a volunteer, serving on the Waterville hospice board of directors.

When he approached Russo on the racquetball court that day, he had a hospice fund raiser in mind.

"I told him: 'Rick, I'd like to capitalize on the fact you are a man of some notoriety and that one of your books ('Empire Falls') was filmed here," he said.

At the hospice, Duff introduced Russo to its executive director, Dale Marie Clark. The three friends sat down together to discuss fund-raising ideas.

"He (Russo) was very down to earth, warm and friendly, with a great sense of humor. It was obvious he cared about community. He recognized our agency does good work and we operate on a shoestring," Clark said.

"Rick said: 'You have stories, and I can write stories. And, there are other Maine writers who do a beautiful job building characters,'" she said.

The fruits of that brainstorming session is a small book with a big heart: "A Healing Touch: True Stories of Life, Death and Hospice," edited by Russo and published by Down East Books.

The book will be launched from 4 - 6 p.m., April 11, during a volunteer celebration at the Waterville hospice. Russo and the other contributing authors will be on hand for a book signing. All author royalties will be donated to Hospice Volunteers of the Waterville Area, an agency that serves 27 communities within a 25-mile radius of Waterville.

The book is a collection of six stories of tragic loss and heart-wrenching transformation, as shared by local people and their families who have benefited from the many services offered by hospice workers to individuals at the end of their lives and for the loved ones left behind.

Although drawing its inspiration from the Waterville hospice, the book brings needed attention to the compassionate services rendered by similar hospices in Maine and elsewhere.

Each well-crafted story is built on real-life interviews written by novelist Russo and five other Maine authors: Crime writer Gerry Boyle of China, poet Wesley McNair of Mercer, novelist and nonfiction writer Bill Roorbach of Farmington, essayist and story writer Susan Sterling of Waterville and novelist Monica Wood of Portland.

"I hit up some of my friends. I did very little editing. They are all fine writers," Russo said.

The original plan was, he said, that each author would interview three or four hospice volunteers. The most compelling would be picked for the book.

"We knew we'd get people who had things happen to them in their lives -- extraordinarily moving things, but not all events make stories," Russo said.

Later, he realized his preconceived notion was wrong.

"In fact, I could have written all three of mine. When we all (writers) got together, we looked at each other in horror and said, how are we going to decide? We did the story that just nailed us," he said.

Russo chose to write about his friend, Duff, and his "private, ongoing hell" dealing with his wife Ann's precipitous decline with Alzheimer's disease.

"My grief took place before my wife died," Duff said.

The stories are darkly personal yet uplifting, and well told. None of the writers lapse into the moribund or sentimental. Each story realistically conveys the deep transcendence that can be born out of devastating loss.

"It demonstrates a lot of hope for people who read it," Clark said.

A bonus of the book is seeing how the minds of six excellent writers craft a story.




". . . I knew all those (hospice) people for years. I have companioned them through the grief process. The authors catch glimpses of some of the things they went through, that I, looking from the outside, didn't grasp. They shared so deeply with these authors. I was struck by their courage. They really bared their souls," Clark said.

Duff was amazed by Russo's revelations.

"He (Russo) picks up on a lot of the use of words and tones, and then, he can twist them and turn them and analyze them. He is such a tiger. He puts his heart and soul into it," he said.

Lynn Ascrizzi -- 621-5731

lascrizzi@centralmaine.com

Bookmark and share this story:   

[Questions/Comments?](#)

Copyright © 2008, Blethen Maine Newspapers, Inc.