Easing the journey: Hospice workers ensure nobody grieves alone

By Toni Lepeska

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Sybil Crawford noticed her husband's labored breathing sounded a little different, so she asked him for a kiss.

Without opening his eyes, he pursed his lips, and the high school sweethearts who'd been married 56 years shared one last romantic moment. Bob Crawford died.

He did not die alone, and Sybil Crawford did not grieve alone. Hospice workers and volunteers helped them through the most challenging journey of life, not the moment of death really, but the long journey of dying.

"It's the best it could be, to have a sympathetic ear, someone who knew what to expect," said Crawford, 77, of Hernando, whose husband had Alzheimer's and then contracted pneumonia.

"He came home with hospice and he died at home. It was so good to have him home. He knew he was home."

Crawford became a Unity Hospice volunteer 18 months later in the same Alzheimer's wing of the assisted-living facility her husband had lived until five days before his death.

Unity Hospice is one of the service providers that gives professional and volunteer care to the disabled and dying. Hospice is designed to provide palliative care after reasonable measures for cure of disease have failed.

Patients must be referred by a physician, and Unity is paid by Medicare, Medicaid or private insurance.

Though volunteers outnumber staff at the Southaven and Holly Springs offices serving the area, Unity representatives say they want to make a public plea for more volunteers. They always need more volunteers.

Celeste Yanes, volunteer coordinator, said volunteers provide an indispensable service, helping patients and caregivers make the best use of the time left.
Volunteers come in two sizes: contact and non-contact. Contact volunteers, after a background check, make visits to homes or living facilities to simply get to know patients and listen to them.

They also can help relieve caregivers for a few hours. Volunteers read to patients, play music for them and "listen to a lifetime of stories," Yanes said.

"You have to be a very good listener," Yanes said. "You have to have a lot of compassion, a lot of empathy. It's a lot to be a volunteer, but I think the rewards are tenfold."

Non-contact volunteers make quilts and throws for patients, assemble goodie bags, bake cookies, send cards and conduct handyman services.

"We've actually had Christmas trees we donated to a couple of patients," Yanes said. "If there's a need, we try to address it."

Daphine Craig, 69, of Olive Branch is a contact volunteer. Every week she visits Robert Rooker at Hermitage Gardens, an assisted-living facility in Southaven. Both grew up on farms in Mississippi.

Rooker, 88, a retired truck driver, has been diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and uses a wheelchair to get from place to place. He sits on the patio with Craig about an hour, then they eat lunch.

"The hospice team, they see me here," Rooker said. "I always thought you had to be on your last legs for hospice, which I found out was different."

Unity Hospice representatives say they'd like to overcome the fear people have of enrolling in hospice. They want caregivers and patients to experience the good that can come from the service.

The earlier relationships are started with hospice, the easier it is for caregivers and patients to lean on the people who know the process of disease and dying and can help guide the way.

"It makes their grief journey easier," Yanes said. "Hospice prepares you for that stage."

Crawford's husband was in hospice several months before he died. When it looked like he was at the end, his wife brought him home from Hermitage Gardens.

Hospice representatives were at the home every day for the five days he lived.

"The nurse came every day to check on him," Crawford said. "The night before he died, I had to call for help because he was breathing so heavily. They came at 11 p.m. They were with him when he died."
Hospice walked with Crawford through the illness and then for months gave her bereavement counseling. Now Crawford walks with others through their illness. Her journey helps ease others' journey.

"I knew they needed people," Crawford said. "It brings me joy and a feeling of paying back."

For more information about becoming a volunteer with Unity, call (662) 893-5662.

-- Toni Lepeska: (662) 996-1409