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9-16-2006

Finding peace in death

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By Jennifer Feals

jfeals@seacoastonline.com

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Lou Bacon has worked as a direct service volunteer at Seacoast Hospice for 12 years, caring for many patients during that time. Every new patient she was given, she cared for, embraced, befriended.

"I fall in love with every single one of my patients," she says.

But throughout their friendship and time together, Bacon says she always knew what the outcome would be.

Bacon works with terminally ill patients; patients she will work with for about six months.

For most people, this type of job would bring them down, both physically and emotionally, but Bacon has embraced the opportunity this work gives her of experiencing the end-of-life process with her patients.

"Who gets to do that," she asks. "I just love it. It's a huge part of my life."

"When I first started, people said, 'Oh, it's going to be so hard,' but I didn't really listen. What a great opportunity to be connected with someone, to develop a friendship with someone who is facing the end of their life," Bacon says.

The end-of-life process is extremely difficult for both the patient and their family. Bacon says she has been asked many times how she handles her volunteer work.

"People ask me, 'how do you do that? What do you say?' I would be so scared, it must be so hard," she says. "Well, it is hard. But when people are at a low point in their life, they want to be loved and cared for, and accepted."

That's where Bacon's volunteer efforts came in. With kindness, patience and love she helped guide her patients through the last days of their lives.

"It's more about being there. Being just present for these people," she says.

After working with patients and their families for many years, learning from her own experiences and theirs, Bacon began collecting her thoughts, thinking that what she had learned and experienced could be helpful for someone somewhere. With her passion for writing she turned to publishing a book, which she titled "How To Love Someone To Death."

"The book was always in me from the first time I heard someone say 'How do you do that?'," Bacon says, adding she initially thought "anybody who knows how to love could do this work."

But after experiencing the death of a friend and mentor, with that person's friends and family, she says, "I decided not everybody can do this, because not everybody knows how."

Bacon says the book offers gentle guidance to people who are afraid of the thought of death and offers them ways to deal with that.

We are subliminally taught to fear death instead of looking at it, understanding it and embracing it, she says. "My fantasy is that people will calm down, sit still, and allow themselves to feel their feelings around the subject. Part of that is feeling the fear around the subject."

She says it allows "a time for people to do some simple self-reflection and make a choice of how they want to approach this time in their lives of loving someone to death."

Throughout the short time Bacon and her patients spend together, she shows them that there is someone there to love them, care for them, and just be there when the patient needs them.

"It's more about being there, being just present for these people," Bacon says.

Bacon says there are many ways to be there for someone facing the end of their life and she offers suggestions for care-givers, family members and friends in "How To Love Someone To Death."

In the book Bacon writes, "I have offered gentle guidelines for how to make the choice of participating in support of the dying, attending to the needs of the dying as well as your own needs, and how to begin a dialogue that will help you share thoughts, feelings and beliefs without judgment or doubt."

"Loving someone to death is about careful choices that will help you understand and support the dying, to manage the conflicting and oftentimes fearful emotions that surface for care-givers during this time, and to give comfort and love in the ways that are most appropriate and meaningful to you."

Bacon says she has heard good feedback from readers who tell her the book feels like a warm hug and that it validated them in whatever situation they were in.

Libby Feuer, coordinator of volunteers for Seacoast Hospice, says the book gives a good overall look and advice on the dying process but it's also "nitty gritty, right there with the patient."

"It's very helpful support for the volunteer and family members," she says.

Bacon is working on her second book, the idea of which has stemmed from the 20 months she spent with a Down syndrome patient, Jeff.

"It's about the experience of a volunteer to work with someone who is cognitively challenged. It's an offer to other volunteers to take the risk to work with someone who is different," she says. "I have met dozens of other people like Jeff and have all these new friends because Jeff showed me a new world. There is no difference at all."

"He was the most amazing man, and we had fun for those 20 months. It was about being with him and being excited about living, because that's what he chose," she says.

Bacon says she never thinks twice of what she needs to do for her patients, helping them to feel loved and safe. With Jeff she says she thought, "I'm not dismissing this relationship or pulling back because he's going to die, I'm jumping in and embracing this relationship because he's going to die."

Bacon says her experiences with the dying process have humbled her.

"It always brings me back to that place of realignment of life's priorities. What's important? That's what this work has brought me from the day I started," Bacon says. "It helps me to be so happy about my life. Focus on living, caring, being connected and choosing happiness."

She says when she witnesses the end-of-life process for a patient, she gets to take a look at what is so important in her life and though she will miss the patient and new friend she has made, she knows they have both gone through the experience well.

"At the very end I am happy because I know that person made it. They accomplished that last great goal. Dying is hard, it's a hard job," Bacon says. "There is a quiet happiness inside of me."

Bacon has worked as a mental health therapist, runs bereavement support groups and personal empowerment workshops, and is a professor at New Hampshire Community Technical College in Stratham where she teaches psychology related courses once a week.

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