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Singers bring comfort to dying

RANDOLPH – Light glowed through stained-glass windows at Bethany Church Saturday morning where more than 30 singers from Northfield to Sharon gathered to form a group to sing for the dying. Facing them before the altar rail were five members of Hollowell, a group of community singers affiliated with Brattleboro Area Hospice who since 2003 have been singing in homes and hospitals for those near death.

Valerie Kosednar, a singer from Saxton's River, remembered one summer night standing outside the home of a woman who was dying as crickets sang and the stars came out. The woman's daughters were lying in bed with her as a dozen Hollowell singers sang through the screen door.

Andy Simonds told about singing to a 90-year-old man in Dummerston, his wife of 68 years, their son and two daughters and a yappy little dog. The group sang several songs and then asked the family if there was anything they would like to hear. A daughter answered, "You Are My Sunshine" – her father had courted his wife with the song 72 years ago.

"We started singing this song," Simonds said, "and here's this stalwart, 90-year-old fellow, a strong man – there's a painting on the wall of him and his wife in 1938 – and he just started weeping." The son cried for joy, the family held hands and the dog stopped barking.

"We walked out of there thinking, 'This was so joyful,'" Simonds said. "You walk into one of these things and you've got bills to pay, have to get gas, the car's dirty, and you walk out thinking, 'I have no problems. I have nothing to worry about.'"

Kathy Leo, who worked as a midwife for 10 years, described what happens in the presence of the dying as "time warping." At the moment of death as well as at the moment of birth, she said, "You're getting a little glimpse of how time is not linear. When you get to be at that edge, it's the same energy of souls coming in and souls going out."

Among the singers at Bethany Church was Dr. Jonna Goulding, a family doctor certified in palliative care who, with a colleague, formed the palliative care committee at Gifford Medical Center. "I personally feel that as a culture, we've gotten a long way from death in the last 100 years," she said. "I think the arts offer us the way to bring death back into our lives."

Pam Fournier, Gifford's palliative care nurse manager, organized the hospice singers in Randolph. Fournier worked as an oncology nurse for 10 of her 14 years at Gifford and was drawn to palliative care because she "just felt such a void" when patients who couldn't be cured left and she was no longer part of their lives.

Fournier, who doesn't sing, got the idea for the group after watching a preview of "Holding Our Own," a film about the end-of-life passage which includes footage of the Hollowell singers. She attended one of their workshops in November and asked the singers if they would help start a group at Gifford.

"At Gifford we have a very strong palliative care team and we have a garden room where people come to die," Fournier said. "Families can stay. The dog can stay. It's right off of a beautiful courtyard garden."

Fournier sees singing as a way to ease the suffering of the dying. "I can do all the medicine and suggest pain meds, but it's the spiritual stuff that's harder to do for people, and often people are spiritually empty or distressed," she said.
