



Brattleboro Area Hospice *Newsletter*

June 2011

Brattleboro Area Hospice • 191 Canal Street • Brattleboro, Vermont 05301

VIGIL VOLUNTEERING COMPANIONS DURING THE LAST MOMENTS OF LIFE

This issue is dedicated to that sacred time when the veil thins between life and death



For those whose lives have
gone before,
They blazed their trails
whispering,
To those still here behind
this door
In urgent hopes we're
listening

*Jerral Sopienga,
author of "Urgent Whispers: Care of the Dying"*

When we do vigil, we enter into a paradox of attending a stranger in a most intimate time and manner. We bring compassionate companionship to a person in the last days and hours of their living. As we share our presence, caring and attention often times we experience a sense of reverence and awe as we bear witness to this person's dying. We also support and, at times, guide family members who may be fearful or bewildered. We reassure families this is part of living and that they will get through this. Sometimes we have the opportunity to demonstrate for them ways to connect with their loved one. And we become aware of the honor and privilege of offering this service. *Ryan Murphy, Staff, Hospice Care Coordinator*

It is very quiet. All I can hear is the soft intake of air. Each breath is more shallow than the last and I know it won't be long. I look at the face, at the lips and imagine the smiles, the kisses, the hellos and goodbyes. I look at the eyes and wonder at all they have seen—sunrises, sunsets, births, weddings, deaths, hurts and joys. The breath is very shallow now. I look at the hands and I'm taken down the road of life. What they've touched, held, shaped, made or mended.

All is still. I look at the face. The lines of worry, toil, pain and sadness are easing away. It is done and I am left feeling a sense of loss but also honor. I can think of no greater privilege than to hold the hand of someone taking their final journey.

Betty Chamberlin, Hospice Care Volunteer

BRATTLEBORO AREA HOSPICE VIGIL TEAM

Brattleboro Area Hospice is occasionally contacted with requests to provide volunteers to sit with someone who is very close to dying. Our term for this is sitting vigil or simply vigils. Requests generally come from skilled nursing facilities and hospitals, but may also be from family members. The main reason for these requests is the desire that a dying person not be alone at this time in their life. Our staff makes every attempt to learn as much as possible about the individual who is dying to help make volunteer visits more meaningful.

Most vigils last from a few hours to a few days, usually from 24 to 48 hours. Volunteer visits average from 2 to 3 hours, though, at times, volunteers have stayed overnight.

The dying person's family may or may not be present during vigil. A family who is attempting to be with their loved one as much as possible may prefer that a volunteer sit with their family member when they can't be there or so that they can take time to attend to their own needs. Other families appreciate having volunteers present for the support that they offer to them. Family members may invite volunteers to join them in

attending to the dying person by sitting quietly, sometimes praying, or having conversations about who this person is and telling stories about their loved one's life.

For families, especially those who have not experienced a death before, the presence of volunteers can offer much needed support and assistance. Though being with a loved one who is dying may be hard, sad, or unexpected for some families, seeing a volunteer be comfortable and natural when attending to a dying person can prove to be invaluable. It is not unusual for a volunteer to sit with someone who would be alone otherwise—some have no family or friends who can be there to support them.

A team of vigil volunteer coordinators has been created to assist us with the timely assignment of volunteers during the last hours of life: Mary Quinn, Stewart McDermet, Carrie Walker and Carol Greenberg have each taken on the responsibility of being on call during a quarter of each year to contact and place volunteers.

VIGIL TEAM UPDATE

Since our well attended December 2009 in-service on being with someone very near death, the structure of having a few volunteers coordinate the scheduling of vigil team members has worked well and has certainly been a great help to clients. There appears to be no pattern or manner of predicting how often we will have a request for vigil and thus, especially for those who attended the in-service and have not yet been contacted for vigil volunteering, here's an update.

We have had 6 requests and 57 volunteers who devoted over 200 hours to being present with someone who was dying. Many volunteers returned for more than one shift on a particular case and one volunteer spent two overnights with the dying person. Four of the vigils occurred in nursing homes, one at the hospital and one at home.

Our protocol for responding to requests for vigil support is that a medical determination has been made that this person has entered the dying process, often called actively dying. Though vigils rarely exceed 48 hours, this is not foolproof. While one person

died in the presence of his wife and a volunteer within hours of our being contacted, two people did not die when we were providing this service and the vigils were discontinued.

In one unexpectedly prolonged instance, those who responded to Stewart's calls were left scratching their heads and asking; "Why am I here? This person looks more alive than I feel right now and doesn't seem close to death." After several challenging days, with input from participating volunteers and others, we reassessed the level of support we were offering. This person lived many more weeks, had two wonderfully devoted volunteers and multiple visits by Hallowell.

The volunteer vigil coordinators have all been impressed with the positive responses they receive when contacting volunteers for availability. Invariably they report people asking to be called again, when they cannot respond to the immediate situation. This speaks to the commitment and generosity you all demonstrate and we offer a heartfelt thank you to each of you.

Ryan Murphy, Staff, Hospice Care Coordinator

Don't forget to join us at the
MEMORIAL PLANTING SERVICE
SUNDAY, JUNE 5, 2011, 1:30 PM

Living Memorial Park, Guilford Street, Brattleboro
Plants and marker stones provided
Questions? Call 257-0775

THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING OUR ANNUAL APPEAL

We could not do our hospice and grief work—including the vigil volunteering mentioned in this newsletter—without your help. This month many of you will receive an annual appeal. We remain very grateful for your devotion, hours of work, and the donations each of you give to Brattleboro Area Hospice. Together, we are ensuring that the dying, and those grieving the loss of someone they love, receive loving care along their journey.



2010 Memorial Garden Service
Photo by Elizabeth Ungerleider

REFLECTIONS ON KEEPING VIGIL

Perhaps I am moved to Keep Vigil to learn something about myself. Sometimes “this thing I do on occasion” comes up in conversation and I inevitably find myself fibbing, saying that it is my “community service”, which is such a small part of the reason I really do this. Through the years I fully realize that many in our culture consider this work morbid even though I sense that a shift in consciousness is emerging. Nevertheless, when I enter the room to sit I am poignantly aware that I sit on the Edge of the Abyss, that I am in the presence of the Great Mystery, and that I am in the presence of a Transformation and that I, just an ordinary woman, have been called to bear witness and have answered that call and also to bring some support. But how does one talk of such things? The language of the Mystic, of the Wise Person, of the Alchemist is in order here. So when Ryan or one of the volunteers calls to ask if I can come for a bit I do my best to oblige. And I come with just myself (and perhaps my car keys and sunglasses) and just sit as best I can being as fully present as I can and being very still and quiet and perhaps doing a few small things like swabbing a mouth, gently touching a hand or other available body part, or whispering in an ear. That’s all. And it’s both a comfort and support to encounter another volunteer who is about to their spot on the edge of this abyss in their way and as best as they can.

Suzette Theodorou, Hospice Care Volunteer

The hours before death are so mysterious. When I sit vigil with people I am drawn to prayer. It is a sacred time. But it is also a time of simple physical helplessness. I have had people I thought were unconscious suddenly wake up and ask for help to get to the bathroom. Sometimes they are conscious and are so very grateful for a little moisture applied to their lips and gums. Sometimes their skin is cold to the touch and I can see their muscles relax under the warmth of a blanket pulled up. The people I have sat vigil with have been very busy just with the process of dying. So I do what I can -- I pray for them, I try to make them comfortable, and I love them.

Monica Scherman, Hospice Care Volunteer

SOME THOUGHTS ON SITTING VIGIL

What does it mean to sit with someone whose death is near? What does it mean to support someone, to be a witness, and to be fully present in vigil?

We never know for sure what the situation will be like when we go to sit vigil. Many times it is our first and last meeting with this person. Without a doubt I can truly say that I have never gone into a situation that was exactly like another; even multiple visits with the same person are never the same.

During my first vigil visits, it felt like I stumbled through some of them, going with what my mind could come up with to offer. Fortunately I received wise advice from my first hospice patient's friend who, in response to what should I do for my client, said that I should follow my inspiration, i.e., I should follow what my heart feels is best at the time. This is what informs me the most now. I have to be careful to be aware and be sure that it's not just me wanting things to be a certain way. It involves a kind of listening and being present with what is at that time and place.

Sometimes questions come up about how to relate with family members or friends who are present when you arrive or who come during the time that you are there. You may know their names, and sometimes not—sometimes not even have a clue as to who they are. Some people are so glad that you are there as a support, as someone to talk with, or just someone to be there with them and their loved one. Then other times it seems they may think things like, "I'm not sure why you are here," or "I'm not sure how to be with you," or "We're not sure we even need you here."

With a hospice client that you get to know over time, these things become known through experience. But with a vigil visit, it is the immediate situation that you are presented with and you present yourself to. In preparation, I follow the sage advice of a volunteer who talked at my training. He said that before he enters a situation, he gives himself some time to be quiet and make space in his mind and heart. I would add to this that I also allow for imperfection on my part and what happens while I am there, knowing that my intention is to do the best I can.

As I look back I remember so many visits. At times the client is at peace whether awake or not. One client did not want to be touched but really wanted someone to just be there—he didn't want to be alone, whether he was sleeping or not. One woman was very agitated when I arrived and as I sat there it occurred to me to stroke her head and she calmed down. (This didn't work with another person—there goes trying to make generalizations.)

Another awoke while I was holding her hand and said, "Oh, thank you!" Another died when I played the Hallowell CD and took her last breath when the words "May God hold you in the palm of His hand" were sung. At these times I felt that my visits made a difference but I'm really not sure. At times you know nothing but sitting beside the person quietly just feels right. Then sometimes you are aware that you are there only as a support to loved ones.

In this work I wonder sometimes if there is this life force that exists in all of us and what defines it, and then what defines when it ends and it is time to go. This question comes up for me most when the person I visit is lively and engaged while I'm there and then I hear that he or she died that night. And sometimes, it is just a question that doesn't need an answer—it is just what is.

And then I wonder what it would be like to be a person who receives a vigil visit. Would I want someone that I don't know with me when I am close to dying? Would I want to be alone at this time? I think I would appreciate someone with me because I have witnessed it from the other side. But then again, maybe not—who knows?

In the end, there is the question, "What IS this service that we volunteer for?" and then, "Why?" I think the answers are many, but I feel that our service can sometimes complete a giving circle where it is hard to tell who is the giver, who is the receiver, and what is the gift. These can be hard to decipher at times, but I think what remains is the gift itself—complete and the best there is to be.

We can maybe see that we are part of a whole. And we may also discover that our hearts are large enough to hold whatever we encounter, whether a visit is easy or difficult. With time we may see things with a clearer perspective and know that a difference has been made in our client's and our own lives. I think that defining just what this is isn't necessary.

Mary Quinn, Vigil Volunteer Coordinator

Sitting vigil is a very comforting place for me to be. I know many are uncomfortable being with an actively dying person. I find it soothing and peaceful.

Since taking the hospice training course, I have been involved exclusively, until recently, with vigil work. The people I have had the pleasure of being with are no longer mobile, some are not taking nourishment, and many are resting quietly sleeping. I have done my work at Pine Heights, Thompson House, and Brattleboro Memorial Hospital.

When I sit with a client, I like to be close enough so that I can hear them or lend a comforting hand if they need the gift of touch. I check in with my client to introduce myself, let them know what the weather outside is like and to let them know I will be with them so they are not alone. Often I am sitting with someone as a “bridge” until a family member arrives from far away or another volunteer is called in for a later sitting. I have sat in the day and in the evening. I have been asked to sit with someone on Christmas Eve when there was no one else.

It is my pleasure to be with someone in their final hours. I make no judgments, I ask very little, I give the gift of myself so they won't be alone.

I'm not sure how many of us really want to be alone when our time comes, but I always feel like each one of my clients has given me the gift of their company.

Cindy Hutcheson, Hospice Care Volunteer

In 1995, I was assigned to my third hospice client, a woman I'll call Sarah, who was exactly my age (44) and had breast cancer. With a prognosis of one year, she had referred herself to Hospice and requested one volunteer, whom she said she wanted to get to know while she was still well enough to enjoy having a new person in her life. Someone who, by the time she approached death, might hopefully have become a good friend.

At our first meeting, Sarah explained that there had been lifelong difficulty with her family members, so much so that she could not confide in or entrust her feelings to them. She asked me to promise not to discuss our conversations with them, and I reassured her that I would take great care with whatever she shared with me.

We began a series of outings—the art museum, lunch out, visits to some old haunts. On each occasion she shared painful memories of past events and trauma. Following each revelation, she seemed more at peace. I learned much from her: there were issues in my own life that I had not yet looked at with as much courage or clarity. Months passed; as she weakened we used a wheelchair; soon she was no longer able to leave the apartment she shared with her mother. We saw one another once or twice a week and spoke on the phone many evenings, a time when she was often beset by anxiety.

One morning, a year after I had first met Sarah, her mother called me to say that Sarah had been brought to the hospital, and had asked that I join her there. When I arrived, she told me that she was afraid. “Will you stay here overnight with me?” she asked, and I made arrangements with the nurse to have a cot brought in. Then she said, “It would make me happy to be cremated in some of your clothes.” We laughed together then, having often discussed our shared love of luxurious fabrics. I went home to pack an overnight bag. Flannel PJs for me and silk ones for her, a pair my sister had bought for me at Victoria's Secret as a birthday gift years earlier, now even silkier from many washings. I smiled as I packed them. When I returned to the hospital, Sarah was barely conscious. I lifted the pajamas out of my bag and held them up for her to see. She smiled, then closed her eyes. “Don't leave me,” she whispered. An hour later she was unconscious. She would not wake again.

Several hours later, her family arrived—mother and aunt, both in their eighties, strong and robust, agitated and unsettled. I asked if they would like to have some time alone with her, but they asked me to stay, and soon departed. By evening Sarah's breath was raspy and uneven, a sign that death was near. I sat with her until midnight, then climbed onto my own bed next to hers, dozing on and off. When awake, I sat beside her or lay in bed looking up at the ceiling, wondering why I had been lucky enough to know her, and to earn such trust.

*Muriel Wolf, Staff, Bereavement Volunteer Coordinator
Former Hospice Care & Bereavement Volunteer*

WELCOMING BACK LIZA TO THE EXPERIENCED GOODS CREW

Liza King, shop manager at Experienced Goods from 1990 to 2002, is back with us in a new capacity. She is creating window displays at both shops and is working part time at our Elliot Street Home Furnishings shop as well. Liza is enjoying reconnecting at the shop as an employee, although she admits she has been a regular customer for many years. When she is not at the shop, she can usually be found working with stained glass at Neumann Studios, a custom architectural glass studio which she owns with her partner Rick. Liza's two daughters, who were nine months old and four years old when she began managing the shop, are now twenty-two and twenty-five years old.

Back in 1990, Liza recalls, the shop was in its infancy, a lovely tiny shop managed by Alison Macrae and Kris McDermet, facing the Harmony Parking Lot. At the time (prior to the purchase of our first pricing gun) the desk volunteers tagged each item of the many clothing items with a safety pin. Prior to the purchase of the steamer, other volunteers brought home linens and clothes to iron. Liza and a volunteer would also pack her station wagon full of bags and boxes of clothes

every couple of nights. They would spread the items out in the living room—much to the chagrin of Liza's family—and sort and box items for the appropriate season. Fortunately Experienced Goods was soon able to rent the large basement area below the neighboring shop and this particular practice ceased.

During the next 13 years, the shop had four major expansions in order to accommodate the numerous wonderful donations and the equally wonderful customers. One of these expansions involved breaking open a wall to acquire access to the Elliot Street entrance, which proved to be the perfect move. Now, years later, after Experienced Goods moved to Flat Street, it has reopened its home furnishings at this original Elliot Street location. Liza and the shop have come full circle in a way, and they are each experiencing a new chapter in another sense. She is enjoying discovering the shop in a new way, meeting former volunteers and customers and new folks as well. Feel free to stop by the shop and pick Liza's brain if you want to hear more tales of the old days.

FURNITURE AT EXPERIENCED GOODS HOME FURNISHINGS

Spring is in the air! If you are cleaning out your home or office & have pieces of quality furniture you'd like to donate to a great cause, look no further! Experienced Goods Home Furnishings would be happy to give folks the opportunity to buy good furniture at good prices, while sales proceeds go to Brattleboro Area Hospice.

Drop off furniture during our regular store hours (Tuesday-Saturday 10:30pm-5:00pm, Sunday 12:00pm-5:00pm). Pick up is available on Tuesdays for items you are unable to deliver. Call Karen or Dar at the store to make an appointment for pickup: 802-246-1305. Thank you!

CONGRATULATIONS TO NEW VOLUNTEERS

This spring ten new volunteers completed the 33 hour training Hospice Care Training and most will be joining BAH as active volunteers. We are pleased to welcome them. They are: Natalie Baker-Merrill of Brattleboro, Susan Botelho of Brattleboro, Kathy Burris of Brattleboro, Richard Ewald of Putney, Robyn Flatley of Brattleboro, Gloria Klein of Brattleboro, Jane Noyes of Dummerston, Joanna Rueter of Brattleboro, Coni Richards of Putney and Rebecca Seymour of Brattleboro. Thanks and congratulations to all.

THE VIGIL SING: THE HEART OF HALLOWELL

What does it mean to keep vigil? To watch over someone as they make their journey towards death, to offer support by being present so they don't feel alone. To keep vigil is to know how to "stay" in the presence of mystery. How does Hollowell offer songs into this vigil space? The heart of our practice is what we have come to know as our vigil sings. Whether we are called to a bedside in a hospital where a person is dying with no family to share their journey or called to a loving home where someone is surrounded by family and loved ones, we offer our songs as a way to help keep vigil; to witness, to watch over, to accompany with words expressed through songs.

When we are called to a vigil sing, we arrive and enter with respectful quiet. Take off our shoes. Move slowly through a house to integrate ourselves into the place where others are already holding the vigil space. We have learned how to make ourselves small, how to move and breathe and sing from the silence and reverence in the room. We sing into the spaces between the final breaths. We fill the room with songs, to tend the family's emotions, to bring calm and solace to the journey being undertaken. We practice deep listening, watching for subtle responses or changes in the dying person or the family tending him or her. We then choose songs accordingly, maybe to match the slow labored breath of the dying person. Perhaps a chant will be sung over and over, in a foreign language so as not to distract the dying person from his or her hard work. Or we might select a song that speaks to the hearts of the vigil keepers, giving them a place to rest for a moment. In this place, we have witnessed grief, reconciliation, spiritual ease, love and grace.

The late afternoon we sang for Morgan, we circled outside his home in the driveway before entering. We had visited him several times for social sings before this sing. When the call came that he was close to dying and singers were requested, four of us gathered within a half hour to sing for him one last time. I shared with the others what I knew about his journey so far. I reminded all of us that we have everything we need to make this journey at the end of our life. Not unlike the way a woman knows how to give birth though she has never done so before, a dying person knows how to die. Whether we each believe this or not, we went into this sing with that beautiful thought in our hearts and sang it through the songs we chose. Morgan rested in his sunroom, surrounded by family and beloved caretakers who had been sitting beside him all through the long night and day. As we sang, we watched heads bow and tears slide quietly down cheeks. Morgan seemed to soften. His breathing changed slightly. He seemed deeply peaceful when we left as did those who sat with him and waited with him. Morgan died twenty minutes after we left.

We stayed for over an hour with Mary the day we visited her in her old farmhouse. This was our third and last sing for her. Our vigil sing. She had a caretaker on either side of her, holding her hand, matching breath with hers as we sang. We sang quietly, chants and quiet sacred songs in Croatian and Russian. We hummed. We could feel Mary's spirit ready to depart the body. There was so much energy in the room as we sang. One singer started to feel light-headed. Another felt chills from her head to her feet. Another had to sit down. Another felt her throat tightening. It was time for us to leave as quietly as we had come. To slip away. So that Mary could do the same. Which she did as we circled in the driveway. I realized that had we stayed another hour, she probably still would have slipped away as we circled in the driveway. What do we know?

Again and again we are blessed by these powerful moments of deep sharing with a soul at the very end of their life. Being invited to be part of a vigil as singers is what keeps Hollowell ever humble and reverent in our practice of bedside singing. The vigil sing invites us to be witnesses, to use the gift of our songs as a way to "stay" present with a dying person, to assist them on the journey we will all make when our time comes. Those who die before us teach us about grace. Singing into this sacred space where vigil is being kept is a gift of grace for us all.

*Kathy Leo, Hospice Care Volunteer
Founder & Coordinator of Hollowell*

Brattleboro Area Hospice

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Store Assistants Flat Street

Christopher Gabriel
Christopher John
Jen Reichman

Brandi Lyn Younger

Store Assistants Eliot Street

Karen Abel
Tom Harris
Liza King
Dar Tavernier-Singer

Calendar

June 1 & 15, Wednesdays, 5:30 to 7 pm. Suicide Loss Support Group, meets the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays of each month. Facilitated by Andrea Edwards. This group is co-sponsored by The Samaritans, Inc. www.samaritansnh.org

June 5, Sunday, 1:30 pm. Memorial Planting Service. All are welcome to join us in remembering our loved ones at the Hospice Memorial Garden at Living Memorial Park, Guilford St, Brattleboro.

June 6. Volunteer Report Forms due.

June 7, Tuesday, 5 pm, Raindate for Memorial Planting Service at the Hospice Garden, Living Memorial Park, Guilford Street.

June 8 & 22, Wednesdays, 5 to 6:30 pm. Spouse/Partner Loss Support Group, meets the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays of each month. Facilitated by Cheryl Richards.

June 9, Thursday, All Day. Hospice & Palliative Care Council of Vermont annual conference.

June 13 & 27, Mondays, 6:30 to 8 pm. Bereaved Parents Support Group, meets the 2nd and 4th Mondays of each month. Facilitated by Lynn Martin.

June 20, Monday, 5:30pm. Board of Directors meeting.

Save the date: Wednesday, June 22, The Actor's Theater Playhouse will be doing a performance of "Dead Man's Cell Phone" as a fundraiser for Brattleboro Area website after June 1st.

All of our services are free because of you!

We rely on donations from the community to keep our services free of charge. Help support our work by sending a donation to: Brattleboro Area Hospice, 191 Canal Street, Brattleboro, VT 05301. Thank you!