



Benton  
Hospice  
Service

## TO LIVE WELL, TO DIE WELL

*Caring Times, Fall 2003*

“We know how to live well. Now we must learn how to die well,” Renate Schuller said to her husband Max as they drove home from the doctor’s appointment in which they learned that he was not going to “beat” this third cancer.

Max Schuller had lived with great energy. A graduate physicist of the Technical Institute in Munich, he was recruited to immigrate to the United States during the Sputnik era. America was seeking the best scientific minds in the world, and Max had one of them. Not only did Max work hard, he played hard, too. The ski slopes of the Alps were a second home. Travel and friends were important diversions.

Although his intellect was exceptional, his career impressive, and his athletic prowess considerable, Max’s priority was always family. He and Renate welcomed four daughters, and later seven grandchildren (and counting). Sports—skiing and tennis—and music—Max played violin—were integral parts of their home life. Opa Max definitely planned to live a long time and oversee the rearing of more grandchildren.

That last visit to the doctor changed those plans. The family called hospice.

“Rudy, now that I am dying, I have become a movie star.” Max said to his brother during a phone call to Germany. Max was referring to the fact that his bed had become a virtual throne, from which he presided over his care and visitors. For as long as he was alert, his bedroom was filled with people and laughter, and with funny stories from a rich and fulfilling life.

The four daughters arrived from Corvallis, Hood River, Seattle, and Hawaii. They eagerly did what they could to care for their father, mother, and one another. Even in the face of impending death, the atmosphere within Max’s home conveyed peace and calm. Nurse Francie and massage therapist Piper kept Max comfortable; physical therapist Elizabeth devised strategies to maintain his independence.

Max declined quickly. While his will remained firm, his body didn’t allow him to hold court in his bedroom for very long. Constantly at his side, his daughters and wife stroked and talked to him even when he could no longer respond. When they became exhausted, hospice staff encouraged “taking turns.” Strategies and goals evolved. Harp music replaced laughter. Renate observed that when harpist Sharon played, “Love was flowing through the room.”

Shortly before Max died, the family invited spiritual counselor Ned to pray with them and anoint Max. The inclusion of seven-year-old grandson August seemed natural. August held the small bowl of olive oil used in the anointing and inquired why Ned was

blessing the oil. Oma Renate replied that the blessing instilled God's power into the oil. "Oh," replied August, contemplating the now "weightier" bowl in his hands. "Yes. I can feel it getting heavier." Then Renate asked, "Can we do his feet, too, so his soul has strength to walk to God?" First Ned, then Max's wife, daughters, and grandson each anointed his forehead, hands, and yes, his feet.

The night Max died, the house was full of sleeping daughters and grandchildren. Renate and daughters woke up spontaneously and went to Max. They lit candles for each person present in his room. Just as one candle sputtered out, Max took his last breath. They summoned Ned to pray with them and nurse Danise to tend to her duties, and then they bathed Max's body in water scented from lavender and rosemary water from their garden.

As a brilliant scientist, Max sought solutions to problems all his life. While he wasn't ready to leave his family, Max confronted the ultimate challenge of dying well with those he loved. Renate concludes, "We, who walked the path through illness and dying with him, know that he found the solution, in letting himself flow into peace."