



Benton
Hospice
Service

COMPASSIONATE COMPANIONSHIP

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When death appears imminent, most people do not want to be alone. While a very few individuals seem to need solitude to die, they are a decided minority. Most of us long for another person's presence. For some, however, no family or friends are available to be at bedside around the clock—not even at the very end.

When nurses recognize that death may be near, Benton Hospice Service now has 20 skilled volunteers available to provide this type of support. The role of these Compassionate Companions is to provide a calming presence for that final journey. They might read, hold a hand, play music, or minister to simple physical needs. Mostly they are simply present. Veteran volunteer Linda Bercerril explains why she became involved. "It makes me sad to think there are people who have no one to be with them in their last hours. After the death of my own husband and the wonderful treatment by hospice, I knew I wanted to give back. What better way than becoming a Compassionate Companion!"

Joanne Malkin, Volunteer Coordinator, explains that the need for this service has increased in recent years. "More people are living alone," she says. "People are outliving their relatives and friends, or they may have family, but the family is far away or perhaps just not involved."

The Compassionate Companions program provides a structure to ensure that volunteers are well-prepared. Before sitting on a vigil, volunteers must have completed 33 hours of training and six months' service volunteering in other capacities. They are called on short notice and are expected to say "yes" whenever feasible. Volunteers are scheduled around the clock, sometimes sitting up through long nights.

Compassionate Companions view their role as an honor. "It's such a privilege to spend that time with somebody," says volunteer Marilyn Dorsey. "It's a very intimate time. We go on an extraordinary journey in our final days, and to be a part of that for somebody else is just an amazing experience."

Volunteer Kathy Benson believes she brings "a sense of calmness and tranquility in the final moments of a patient's life."

Volunteer Mari Beth Hackett notices the parallel between midwifery and her companionship role. "As I watched her [the patient] struggle for each and every breath as she had been doing for several hours, I felt my most important role was to encourage her just like I had done when I had assisted a midwife. I held her hand and told her that she was doing just what needed to be done, and that she was doing a good job."

This powerful first experience as a Compassionate Companion was shared by volunteer Deb Hollenback. “When I arrived at ‘Sara’s’ home, the previous companion was sitting next to her, with soft music in the background. I introduced myself to Sara. Her breathing was less labored for a moment, and I believe she understood that someone new was there. While she didn’t respond directly to my touch, I sensed that she didn’t mind it. Intermittently, I turned her pillow, wiped her eyes and brow, swabbed her mouth. When she seemed warm, I opened windows. I read a little from Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet*. Mostly I sat quietly with Sara. At moments I wondered if my being there was helpful to her. As the congestion built, being a peaceful companion became difficult. Then there was a shift in her demeanor—it would seem almost a conscious decision to let go. About that time, my replacement companion, Annie, arrived. I couldn’t leave. Sara’s breaths came less and less frequently.

“I held Sara’s hand, and Annie held mine as Sara died. It was a powerful, silent time. It was an honor to have been there, to have known her, however briefly. My doubts about being there were silenced—we had made a difference.”