



Benton
Hospice
Service

EVERY LIFE HAS A STORY

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by Karen Nousen

A World War II veteran tells of being blasted off his ship at Pearl Harbor. A former high school basketball coach chokes up over his championship team of fifty years ago. A husband proudly models five shirts his late wife sewed for him while telling of his life with her. A woman lovingly admonishes her kids and grandkids to "Watch where you step."

Every life has a story: every person has a message to share. The goal of the Life History Project is to capture that story and message. BHS offers this unique service through its volunteer program.

A life history is a videotaped review of a patient's life. It's a chance for patients to spend some time looking back, reminiscing, and recognizing the value of their life experiences. It's also an opportunity to record for family members and future generations the stories and experiences collected over a lifetime.

Gloria Foster, who died in September in hospice care, offered to share her life history experience. She chose to create a life history for herself and her family "because it's good for the kids to have, and their kids, too. It's something that they can have their whole lives."

Gloria told stories of growing up in the Dakotas and of playing banjo and piano for years in various local groups. The life history team recorded one of her monthly jam sessions with three other banjo players. A longtime musician, Gloria thus provided her own musical accompaniment for parts of her life history film.

"At first I was a little bit intimidated," Gloria recalled. "But your intimidation goes away as you go along. You get into your stories and try to think of some more to tell."

BHS's life history team is made up of volunteers Jeri Corbin, Karen Nousen, and Nancy Warren. These three have created dozens of life histories over the years, each one a gift to the hospice patient and family.

"We do this because we think it's important for patients to have the chance to spend time looking at their lives and recognizing their value and importance, whatever their experience has been," Karen says. "It's such a gift to families to have this living memorial once their loved one is gone."

Each life history is a reflection of the patient's life: that person's stories, hobbies, family, philosophy of living. Having a patient recorded on video provides a lasting record of a special voice, face, and laugh.

“It’s a wonderful tool for grieving too,” says Joanne Malkin, Volunteer Coordinator at BHS. “The life history serves as a way to remember a loved one and helps a family through its grief.”

Jackie Stankey, BHS Patient Care Coordinator, is a strong supporter of the Life History Project. “Doing a life history gives our patients an area where they are in control,” Jackie states. “This gives them a sense of purpose that this is something their families will value, one more service they can provide.”

Once a patient has requested a life history, the Volunteer Coordinator assigns one of these trained volunteers, who arranges with the patient and family a time to meet and get started. This may take just one or several taping sessions, depending on a patient’s energy level and ability to remember. Editing the video, scanning pictures to include, and selecting music take up the most time in putting a life history together. When the life history is completed, the volunteer makes copies for patient and family, who become sole owners of the finished product. The volunteer does all the work; the patient’s job is the remembering.

Gloria encouraged others to give it a try. “I think it’s a good idea. Do it for posterity. Do it for your own amazement. Or your own amusement. Just do it.”

After Gloria’s death, her daughter Margy wrote BHS, “I can’t tell you how glad we are to have the life history. I thought it was great before she was gone but now it’s even nicer to have because we can see her face and her smile whenever we want. What a wonderful thing to pass on to future generations.”

The life history team recently completed a short video that explains more about having a life history recorded and what to expect throughout the process. The video is available for patients and families who want to learn more before making a decision.