



SPECIAL MOMENTS FOR BHS VOLUNTEERS

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by Cathy Smith

In our lifetime we are fortunate when we are able to establish a close rapport with another person. Recently, two volunteers shared memorable experiences they'd had with hospice patients. Both stories differ remarkably, yet each reveals that same phenomenon—that essence of "connection."

Marjorie Langenbach had been in hospice care about six months when daughter Jean Riley reported that her mother was declining rapidly, but was restless and fighting with "letting go" of this world. Marjorie loved harp music and Suzette McLain, respite volunteer and harpist, was scheduled to play for her. Jean considered canceling the visit, due to her mother's rapid decline, but didn't.

Suzette arrived and began playing. Marjorie was indeed restless, as her daughter sat quietly by her side. Suzette had attended a workshop about music for the dying where she had learned that when dying patients hear familiar music, they often resist letting go of the familiarity of this world. Knowing this, she played through her standard repertoire, assuming that most of the songs would be unfamiliar to Marjorie. Marjorie remained restless. On an impulse, Suzette began playing hymns and other sacred music. Marjorie quieted. "It was truly amazing," Jean commented later. Marjorie's granddaughter arrived and stood nearby. Suzette started playing the well-known song, "Jesus Loves Me," and Jean began singing softly. "Mother," she whispered, "she must be playing this for you." Marjorie gently took her last breath and eased from this world.

Everyone was visibly moved by this powerful moment, but Suzette kept playing and Jean kept singing. Only later did Suzette learn that Marjorie had taught Baptist Sunday school for nearly 60 years! "In spite of the extensive research and knowledge we have," Suzette commented, "sometimes you just have to go with your instinct."

In contrast, BHS volunteer Chip Ullstad had been seeing patient Emily Hovey twice weekly for one and a half years. Chip, an engineer with the City of Albany, and his dog Ruby, a 175-pound Bull Mastiff, "hit it off right away" with Emi. "Emi was a real kick," says Chip. "She was sweet, frank, outspoken—we really connected." Emi missed her late husband terribly. He was an avid river fisherman and she spoke of him often. Emi would hold Chip's hand and tell him about living in California and Arizona, and of her love of lemon milkshakes. They would tease and joke with each other and, yet, could sit together in comfortable silence. Emily told Chip of her desire to be cremated after her death. She wanted her ashes scattered in a river—to "carry her to her beloved husband."

Chip saw Emi for the last time shortly before she died. He wanted to carry out her last wishes and her family was comfortable with this arrangement. On a sunny Sunday

morning, Chip and Ruby said their good-byes to Emi and scattered her ashes into the Santiam River.

We have learned a tremendous amount from research in the field of death and dying. Every so often, the dying themselves offer us a small glimpse into the still unknown corners of this poignant and powerful part of life. We are grateful to our volunteers such as Suzette and Chip who share these special moments with our patients and families.