



LISTENING FOR LITTLE THINGS, MAKING LIFE MEANINGFUL

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By Susan Shumway

How often have you heard “little things mean a lot”? No doubt it’s a familiar phrase, a truth we all take for granted. At hospice, we know it’s true: we see it every day. There is no end to the ways that staff members and volunteers make a hospice patient’s day a little sweeter by the things that they do.

“Listening carefully is an important skill for volunteers,” Susan Livingston, a long time volunteer, notes. “People want to talk about their lives. Often you can pick up great ideas from their answers.” For example, Susan learned that one of her patients was a national expert on gladiolas. “I found out that he had some of his plants in the community garden and so I took him to the garden to see his flowers,” she remembers. “They were almost like children to him, he knew them so well.”

Joan says her father, Wayne Sikes, a patient in an Albany care facility, has always loved travel. “He’s been to all fifty states and even went on the first world tour aboard the Queen Elizabeth II. Now he’s mostly confined to trips to watch my husband and me bowl.”

Kip Spencer, Wayne’s respite volunteer, watched Wayne take out his weathered atlas and trace all the places he had been. “I thought Wayne might like to get out of that care facility and move down the road,” Kip says. He began taking Wayne on short trips to Albany and Corvallis. “Sometimes we get coffee and other times we feed the ducks and geese by the water. You can tell Wayne is a man who has lived a good life; I enjoy his company.”

“I like getting out,” Wayne agrees with a big smile. “It’s been real nice!”

Being an active listener was also the reason Cande Buccola, another hospice volunteer, was able to pick up on something special she could do for Alice Batalgia and her husband. They were tired of the frozen dinners that they often ate while watching TV. “My husband and I looked at each other one night and said, ‘We didn’t like this the first time we had it,’” Alice told Cande.

“The Batalgias had always eaten well in the past,” Cande comments. “They were interested in good nutrition but energy to prepare meals was in short supply.” After questioning them about food allergies and likes and dislikes, Cande prepared meals two or three times a week for them and froze meals for when she was not there. This special TLC had positive effects as well. “Alice told me they slept better and felt stronger. It was such a treat for me to work with such wonderful people.”

As always, teamwork is important. It is often a nurse or social worker who catches a glimpse of an activity that might be enjoyable and shares it with the volunteer to carry forward. Massage therapists and home health aides brighten a patient's life with each visit. Respite volunteers use their imagination in finding just the right music or book that a patient might enjoy or bringing them a treat they might not otherwise be able to have: special coffees, gelatos or fresh fruits from farmer's markets. Other volunteers have helped patients sort through treasured items to make sure they are labeled for the proper recipients.

Rena Woods is a respite volunteer with "Duffy" Dufault. BHS social worker Sharon Harr suggested that Rena try some simple art projects with Duffy, such as punching holes around the edge of bright pieces of poster board for lacing with yarn. Duffy's granddaughter, Heather, remarks that it is good for Alzheimer's patients to use their hands in a variety of ways as it keeps different areas of the brain active.

Rena noticed that Duffy looked out the windows often, so she asked her if she would like to take a walk outdoors. Duffy was delighted, and these walks have become a much anticipated part of her life. Rena has found patients enjoy hearing the songs they learned as children. She discovered this when she and Duffy saw some daisies as they were walking along and Rena began singing "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer true...." Duffy started singing it back to her and now they share other songs from Duffy's childhood.

Working together and listening for clues, hospice team members take what they learn about a patient and combine it with imagination and talent, turning the little things into enriching moments for both patients and staff.

Author Susan Shumway became a BHS volunteer in 2004. In addition to writing articles for the Caring Times, she has provided respite care for 13 patients and their families, worked in the office, developed professional displays for patients' art work, and appeared in BHS' new film, Understanding Hospice.