



Benton
Hospice
Service

CUSTOM CUSHION PROGRAM TAKES PATIENT COMFORT AND MOBILITY TO NEW LEVEL

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by Susan Shumway

It's easy to get Elizabeth Bolte's eyes sparkling. She has been a physical therapist for twenty-seven years, eleven of them with Benton Hospice Service, and she still gets excited about what she does. "I love my work," she says. "It is very satisfying; even though my efforts may be a short-lived intervention, they make such a difference."

Pulling out a picture of one of her patients, she says, "This is how she looked when I first saw her...not very comfortable." The patient is shown slumping in her chair, feet dragging on the floor and head down. With a big smile, Elizabeth turns to the next page. "Here she is after we made some changes," she beams, looking at another photograph. "One of our volunteers made a custom backrest and we adjusted her wheelchair which improved her posture and gave her body better support." Looking at the second photograph, it is hard to believe that it is the same person. The patient is sitting up, head lifted, and smiling at the camera.

Usually, a physical therapist helps a person regain mobility and function through a rehabilitation program. Hospice uses more of a 'reverse rehab' process. As patients progress through their illness, they become less independent. Perhaps at first needing a cane, then a walker, then needing a wheelchair and eventually maybe moving to bed. Throughout this process, Elizabeth works with patients and families to maintain safety, mobility, and comfort.

Safety can mean reducing fall risks or preventing injury to patients and caregivers when making a transfer from chair to bed or sitting to standing. Mobility helps people get where they need to go, often with the assistance of some type of equipment. Comfort comes from protecting vulnerable joints and skin from injury and maintaining good quality of life.

As a physical therapist, Elizabeth knows just how important comfort and mobility are to those who are gradually less able to move around on their own. Staying in the same place too long can lead to skin breakdown, joint contractures, or difficulty in breathing and digestion. Besides these physical symptoms, reduced mobility makes it hard to interact with people and the environment, which may lead to feelings of isolation or depression.

Elizabeth says, "There are a lot of people in wheelchairs or recliners who look like that first picture. They don't look comfortable because they aren't. A standard wheelchair may not fit their particular needs. And it can be hard for family members to see their loved ones in clearly uncomfortable positions."

Recognition of hospice patients' unique needs prompted Elizabeth to take action. "We all know that hospice patients have limited life expectancy," she explains. "Sometimes custom-made equipment would make a huge improvement, but it's very expensive and it can take a long time for such high-tech equipment to arrive. When it looks like a patient's skin might break down, we really do need to do something quickly."

Thanks to generous grants from Frank Oliver in honor and memory of his wife, the Schwallie Foundation, and the Judith and Edwin Cohen Foundation, Elizabeth is able to buy supplies to do interventions that make an immediate difference in patient comfort. Her goal is to develop a 'resource bank' of equipment which will be available for each and every hospice patient who has a need.

"This program allows us to positively change many of our patients' end-of-life experience," Elizabeth says. "And it wouldn't happen without a lot of help."

A whole crew of hospice volunteers contributes to this effort. Joy Jenson created early cushion prototypes. Chris Holtz focuses on making standard wheelchair cushion covers, while Linda Sahnaw crafts waterproof, washable, and stretchy covers for expensive and extremely soft pillows. Jerry Hull specializes in building unusually shaped cushions, making covers with precise, tailored corners and zippers. "It's great to have a skill that can be applied to help others," he comments quietly. "I've had so many kindnesses done for me, I can't begin to pass them all on but I keep trying."

"Curt Seeliger is another volunteer who brings his wonderful mechanical abilities and his specialized toolkit at a moment's notice," says Elizabeth. "I'll be talking to a patient or family member, getting information, making my assessment, and while I'm doing it, Curt's taking out the old bolts on a wheelchair and putting in new ones." Like many other volunteers for BHS, Curt not only reconfigures wheelchairs for client comfort and safety but also helps patients with range of motion exercises. "This is a lot of fun," he comments, "so I try to encourage other volunteers to take the ROM class whenever it is offered."

Elizabeth sighs happily. "I have wonderful volunteers. They have such a diversity of skills and abilities. Custom cushions should be expensive, but because we have so many volunteers donating their time and expertise, these cushions end up being a great value."

Elizabeth credits Dick Knight, aka the Foam Man, for his assistance in selecting and preparing the right foam for each application and the Rain Shed staff for their help in finding waterproof, washable, durable and affordable fabrics.

Elizabeth has developed a kit of foam, sheepskin, glue and an electric knife that allows her to do immediate interventions by building individualized support cushions for patients whose needs can't wait.

"I am so thankful for the funds," says Elizabeth. "These gifts have given me the ability to get the equipment and materials that our patients' need. I've also been able to

purchase some high-tech cushions that will be used over and over. On my wish list are more of the high-end, high-tech positioning devices that make such a difference in our patients' comfort and mobility.”

Elizabeth may be too modest to credit her own ingenuity, frugality and passionate determination, but it is her vision and coordinating guidance that have made this project the success that it is. “What matters is patient comfort and quality of life,” Elizabeth will tell you. Thanks to her efforts, generous community support, and the cadre of volunteers who share their time and skill, Benton Hospice patients have both in abundance.