



Benton  
Hospice  
Service

## **BUILDING ON INSPIRATION: HOW A BIG FISH MOTIVATES HOSPICE VOLUNTEER**

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by Karen Nousen, BHS Outreach Coordinator

I find Mike Dyer on his hands and knees fitting a two-by-four to the edge of a fresh sheet of plywood that is the landing of a ramp he started building about an hour ago. It's a warm summer morning, and with the sun beating down he's already worked up a bit of a sweat. Mike gives me a warm smile and a firm handshake that betrays a lifetime of swinging a hammer.

"This is about the seventh ramp I've built for Benton Hospice," Mike explains. "It's something that's easy for me to do that can make a big difference in the life of a hospice patient."

He's right about that. Dorothy Kennedy, a hospice patient since April, hasn't been out of the house in about three weeks. Just recently she's started needing a wheelchair to get around and hasn't been able to negotiate the front steps of her daughter's home to get to the car.

"I miss not getting to see my doctors," Dorothy says. "I have good relationships with my oncologist and regular doctor, and even though my nurse keeps in contact with them I'd really like to visit them again."

Seeing her doctors is just one of the things Dorothy has planned once the ramp is in place. She hopes to be able to visit her children in their homes and do a little shopping, too. Her grandchildren have birthdays coming up, and she still has a gift card from her birthday to spend on herself. "You can't put everything on a shopping list for someone else to buy," Dorothy comments.

As we're talking her phone beeps, which is Dorothy's reminder that her dog Bandit needs his diabetes shot. Dorothy tells me her phone is acting up, but she hasn't been able to get it replaced. So a trip to the phone store gets added to her list of places to go once the ramp is done.

Outside, Mike is making good progress. As he screws boards into place, he tells me what drew him volunteering for Benton Hospice.

"I guess it started with my grandpa," Mike reminisces. Mike's grandfather, Joe Temple, had been trying for decades to catch a fish bigger than the 31- pound Chinook salmon his wife caught in 1959. Joe was stilling trying to beat her record as he neared his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday. He lamented that a broken hip followed by a stroke had "messed his fishing up." Knowing how much it meant to his grandfather to get out fishing, Mike and two friends arranged to take Joe out on the Alsea River for his birthday. They wheeled Joe down to the dock and lifted him, chair and all, onto the fishing boat.

After just 30 minutes a salmon was hooked. Joe's wheelchair quickly turned into a "fighting chair" in the back of the boat, where Joe wrestled his fish for about 20 minutes before landing it. Joe was just tickled to have caught a fish, a 36 pounder. "To get Grandpa out on the boat one more time was great for all of us," remembers Mike. "But for him to finally catch a fish bigger than Grandma's was icing on the cake."

Soon after the fishing trip, Joe declined to the point that his doctor (who still has the photo of Joe with his catch) recommended hospice. This was Mike's first experience with hospice. "And it was terrific," adds Mike. It got him thinking about what he might be able to do for with hospice. He talked with Christy Wright, his good friend who also happened to be a hospice nurse, and she encouraged him to talk with Mari Beth Hackett, the volunteer coordinator.

Mike first offered to take patients on fishing trips. Several have been planned, but too often a patient takes a turn for the worse before the logistics can be worked out. In the meantime, Mike builds wheelchair ramps for patients who need one. As a self-employed building contractor, he has the skills, tools, and flexibility in his schedule to make it happen.

In the beginning Mike also donated materials for these projects. Now, though, the cost of materials are often covered through a grant from the Kiwanis Club.

For Mike, he likes the idea of doing something quick and easy—for him at least—that makes such a difference to another person. He feels it's a healthy example for his kids, too. In fact, his grown daughter Mandy has helped him build about half of the ramps he's completed so far for Benton Hospice Service. Being able to use his business to provide this service also makes him feel better about the contribution Double D Contractors makes to the community.

As Mike finishes his story, the ramp is nearing completion. He estimates it takes him just a couple hours from start to finish. It might not be a big deal to him, but I'm pretty sure it's going to make a *big* difference to Dorothy.