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Hospice: better and bigger

A quarter-century of success brings new needs, challenges

By Jessica J. Burchard
The Winchester Star

Winchester — It was no accident that Helen Zebarth co-founded the Blue Ridge Hospice in 1981.

"I don't believe in coincidence. I think things happen for a reason," she said. "I had no idea when I left for Europe in 1974 that hospice would come here."

Zebarth first learned about hospice care after seeing signs for hospice shops in London.

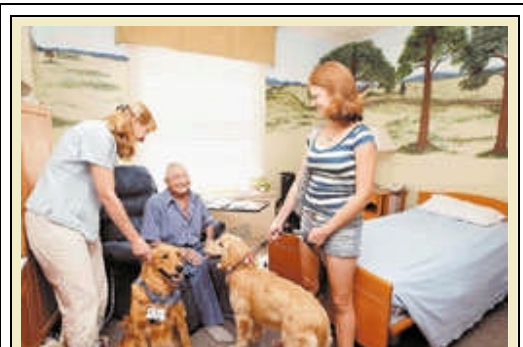
"When I asked my friends about it, they took me to St. Christopher's — a hospice in London," she said. "I was so amazed. It was an old home and I met people the staff said would not be alive by nightfall."

Seeing terminally ill people interacting with their families in a home setting inspired Zebarth. She and her friend Gail Rodgers — whose father had recently died — began working to develop a hospice in the Northern Shenandoah Valley in the late 1970s.

The pair collaborated with the local hospital and churches for space and funding for the hospice. They accepted their first patient in the Winchester Memorial Hospital on Feb. 14, 1981.

"Our first money came from a \$1,000 grant from the Christ Episcopal Church women's group," Zebarth said. "I later applied for a \$30,000 grant from the Episcopal Church and thought I was asking for the moon. I should have asked for \$100,000."

The grant funds allowed the hospice to hire Caroline Hastreiter as director and Nikki



One of the more popular Blue Ridge Hospice services is animal visits. Volunteer Lori Caslin (left) and her daughter Heather brought Maya and Casey (held by Heather) to see patient Oliver "Mack" Taylor in July 2006.
(Rick Foster)

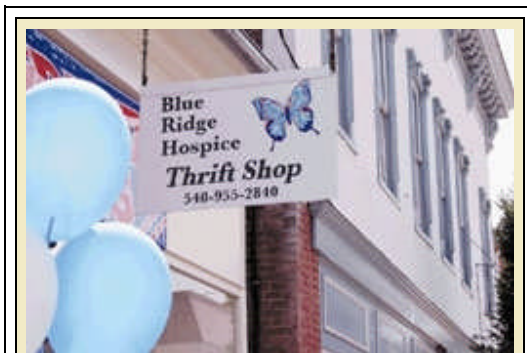
Hill as the first nursing director.

Winchester Memorial gave the hospice a room and paid the electrical and other utility bills. The organization's only expense was long-distance telephone calls.

"The hospital fully supported what we were doing," Zearth said.

Through the generosity of the hospital and area residents, the hospice sustained funding and grew.

"In November 1983, we put an article in The Winchester Star asking for support," Zearth said. "Two weeks later, we raised about \$18,000."



This sign, with the familiar Blue Ridge Hospice butterfly symbol, marks the organization's thrift shop in Stephens City. Similar stores, which raise funds for the hospice, are open in Winchester, New Market, and Purcellville. (Photos provided by Blue Ridge Hospice)

According to figures from the hospice, its original budget was \$10,000 in 1981. Now, the annual budget is about \$10 million.

Several fundraising events are scheduled to help maintain the budget. Among the most successful is the annual Blue Ridge Hospice 5K Run/Walk.

April's 25th Anniversary Butterfly Ball generated \$5,375 for the hospice through the auctioning of 17 butterfly designs made by celebrities.

The mission: quality of life

The hospice's mission has remained the same since it began 26 years ago — to maintain the quality of life of its patients.

"We talk a lot in hospice about the quality of life," said Ernest J. Carnevale Jr., chief executive officer of the hospice. "If there's something we can do to increase the quality of life for someone, we'll try to make it happen."

The patients' requests range from taking piano lessons to seeing a play at a local theater to flying home to die among friends and family.

Local oncologist William Houck Jr., who served as a medical director volunteer for several years, urges people to understand the true benefits of hospice care.

"One of our biggest challenges is getting people to understand hospice can be helpful before you're on your death bed," he said. "We're always trying to treat a patient in a way to prolong their life and quality of life."

Although he is no longer active with the hospice, Houck encourages patients and their families to use it.

"I see it as something we need to bring in early to support both patients and caregivers," he said. "The majority of patients are glad they got involved early."

A variety of services, with a team approach

Carnevale stressed that the care given to each patient comes from an interdisciplinary team of nurses, social workers, volunteers, counselors, religious leaders, and caregivers.

Last year, the hospice provided services for more than 850 patients and 2,000 family members at its seven locations — Winchester and Frederick, Warren, Shenandoah, Page, Clarke, and western Loudoun counties.

To be eligible for hospice care, a patient must meet these criteria:

- * A doctor and the hospice medical director certify that he or she is terminally ill and probably has less than six months to live.
- * He or she is eligible for Medicare Part A (hospital insurance).
- * He or she signs a statement choosing hospice care instead of routine Medicare-covered benefits for the terminal illness.
- * He or she receives care from a Medicare-approved hospice program.

Carnevale explained how Medicare and Medicaid monies help to maintain the hospice.

"Our funding comes from private insurance or Medicare, Medicaid," he said. "We get a daily premium per patient, but it doesn't cover the cost of care. We need about half a million [dollars each year] to take care of our patients."



Blue Ridge Hospice co-founders Helen Zebarth (holding scissors) and Gail Rodgers (at her right) celebrate the opening of the eight-bed residential unit operated by the organization at the 333 West Cork Street medical facility. Also present for the October 2004 ribbon-cutting were Rep. Frank R. Wolf, R-10th (right), and Christopher Curran (left center), the president of the hospice board at the time. (Photos provided by Blue Ridge Hospice)

The care hospice patients receive includes necessary medication, home visits with social workers, sessions with music therapists, and other services.

Volunteers and resources

The hospice has about 130 employees and more than 275 volunteers.

Zebarth recognizes the value of the volunteers to the hospice.

"Our volunteers are hugely important. Sometimes we'll have more than one volunteer work with a patient," she said. "Many, many, many of our volunteers remain in touch with the families."

Hospice employees and volunteer groups work together to support about 180 patients and their families daily.

"I really take value in people who have been here a long time," Carnevale said.

Zebarth has focused on expanding hospice's resources in recent years.

The organization has four thrift shops — in Winchester, Purcellville, New Market, and the newest, which opened in June, in Stephens City.

"With our thrift shops, we get a lot of donations," Carnevale said, "but we also get a lot of stories."

The shops are open from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Each accepts donations of furniture, jewelry, antiques, sports equipment, household goods, clothing, and other items.

These items are in turn sold to help fund hospice programs.

"They're very successful and people give generously to them," Zebarth said.

Expansion

Another important addition to the hospice is the eight-bed residential unit on the fourth floor of the 333 West Cork Street medical facility.

The residential program, which opened in November 2004, was created around the time the hospice administrative offices were renovated. Together, the construction projects cost about \$400,000.

Each room in the residential treatment area is decorated to look like a typical home bedroom.

"The beds look like regular beds, except they can move," Zebarth said. "There's a chair that can fold out into a bed for one family member to stay, too."

A large family-style kitchen is also part of the residential care facility. Caregivers of

the patients are encouraged to visit, make meals in the kitchen, and share them with their loved one.

Zebarth is eager to create another residential area. This one could have up to a dozen bedrooms.

"We had always dreamed of having a big building, but I think what we need now is satellite offices," she said. "I think we need to have several so we'll be meeting our patients without [their] families having to drive so far."

Some of the money raised from 2006's Lights of Love Christmas tree event were put toward a second facility. No plans have been made concerning the time or place of the construction.

Even with the growth of the hospice, Carnevale continues to concentrate on the individual.

"We have a wonderful opportunity to be with somebody when they die," he said.

"Will we change the world? I don't think so, but we may make it better for one person."

On the Internet...

www.blueridgehospice.org

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