

Hospice Program Offers Comfort To Terminally Ill

by Loraine Page

Hospice offers the dying "death with dignity."

The concept originated in England more than fifteen years ago and found its way into this country in 1972. Now, there are about 1200 hospices in the nation, with 33 in New Jersey.

Hospice is for people with only months or weeks left to live. Aggressive treatment has halted, and palliative treatment has taken its place. Relief from pain and the patient's emotional well-being are most important. Hospice puts *quality* of life above all else.

At Hospice of Burlington County, a home-care program that has served about 200 patients since 1982, a hospice team is available seven days a week to comfort the patient and his family. The team includes a nurse, social worker, home health aid, therapist, member of the clergy, and a volunteer.

Though all the team members help make the passage easier for the dying person, it is the volunteer, perhaps, who offers an especially valuable service: The volunteer lends an ear.

"Listening is the most important gift you can give to anybody—to be non-judgmental, and listen objectively," says Sue Goldstein, one of about 40 volunteers for Hospice of Burlington County.

The volunteer is available to hold a hand, prop a pillow, or just be there when a patient voices his fears. "Sometimes they are scared," says Mrs. Goldstein. "Sometimes they are worried how their family will make out after they are dead. Sometimes people are afraid to be alone—afraid to die alone."

Often, a patient will talk freely to a volunteer, while holding back from loved ones to avoid hurting them.

An elderly woman confessed to Mrs. Goldstein that she didn't like dying in the home of her relatives. She felt she was a burden to her great-neices and nephews. The next day she was in the hospital. "I feel like I gave her the vehicle to say that," says Mrs. Goldstein.

Sometimes a volunteer must be perceptive enough to hear what a patient is really saying.

When Charlotte, Mrs. Goldstein's first patient, who was dying of cancer, mentioned that "Ave Maria" was played at her husband's funeral, Mrs. Goldstein asked if she would like it played at hers. "Well, I like the song," Charlotte replied.

Many times it is the patient's family who benefits most from the

volunteer's presence. "We relieve the family," says Mrs. Goldstein. "We give the family somebody to dump on. A lot of times you are doing more for the family—listening to them, doing errands, taking a turn doing the visiting."

She once visited a retired couple who lived alone in the Pine Barrens. The man, who was dying, stayed in his room with the door closed. But Mrs. Goldstein spent time with his wife, listening to her, and letting her cry.

And later, after the man died, Mrs. Goldstein acted on a hunch that his wife still needed comfort. She was driving back from the shore one day with her small daughter, when she stopped in to see the woman. "She put her arms around me, and said, 'I am feeling so bad'" recalls Mrs. Goldstein.

"We just held each other for 10 minutes, and she cried. I felt so good that I was there."

Mrs. Goldstein, a 37 year old wife and mother of two, first became attuned to the needs of the dying when she worked as a registered nurse for 10 years, before her children were born. She was distressed, when she worked in hospitals in New York and California, to see that treatment usually took precedence over a patient's comfort and dignity.

"It upset me," she says. "I am sorry that I was so young when I was working—I would have put up a fight with a lot of the doctors."

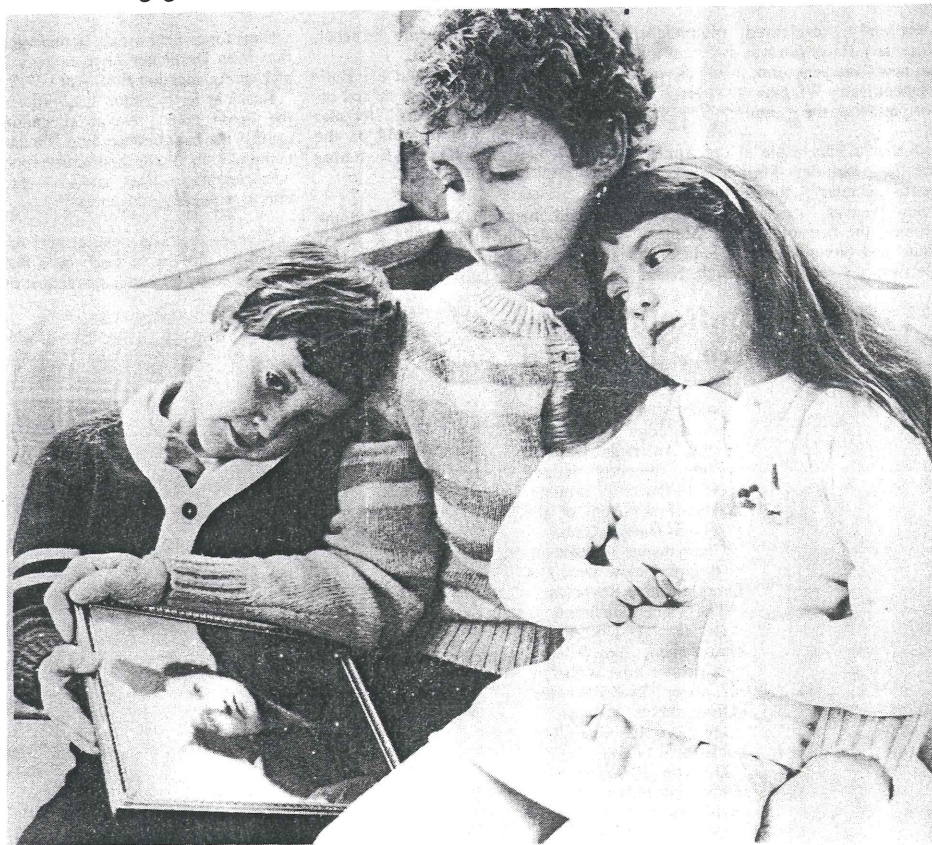
It was after she moved to Medford, and after her two children were born, that Mrs. Goldstein saw an opportunity to help the dying. She read an ad for hospice volunteer training and thought, "The timing is right."

She joined the six-week training course at Moorestown Community House and learned how to deal sensitively with the dying and the bereaved from a staff of instructors, which included psychologists, a chaplain, and a funeral director, among others.

She also took an optional 16-week course from Contact International, the crisis-intervention hotline center where she learned effective listening skills.

Mrs. Goldstein became a hospice volunteer, almost two years ago, with only one stipulation—she would not take a dying child unless absolutely necessary.

Because visiting the dying can be emotionally wrenching, volunteers for Hospice of Burlington County meet for monthly "rap sessions." Mrs. Goldstein attends these meetings



HOSPICE VOLUNTEER Sue Goldstein and her children, Seth and Jessica, recall fond memories of Charlotte (small picture), one of the hospice patients with whom the family formed a close relationship. (Photo by Barbara Moore)

because she finds it helpful to share her experiences.

She spends only a few hours a day several times a week visiting patients because her children, at seven and five, still demand her attention. She admits she cries over patients, and sometimes with them but reasons that, "This is how I am. I cry."

Sometimes she involves her family in a case, and they all become attached to the patient. When she recalls one such patient, Charlotte, the 80-year-old woman who told her stories of Italy when she was 19, it is with the utmost tenderness:

"Most often when we get them (patients), they have only six weeks or two months left to go. But Charlotte was so good for so long, and when she went down, she went down so fast . . . I used to bring my children there. She loved it when the kids were there. My

"I feel good about myself," says. "The hardest thing you can do for your life is face your own death can help someone get through a good feeling."

Note: Anyone can become a volunteer. For more info write Hospice of Burlington 214 West Second Street, Moo N.J. 08057, or call 778-8181

husband came over and fixed her TV.

"She knitted the kids hats and scarves for Christmas though her hands were gnarled from arthritis. They (the gifts) really touched me.

"I really miss her, and my kids talk about her all the time. They ask if they can go to the cemetery."

Acquaintances sometimes tease Mrs. Goldstein about her "unusual" job of visiting the dying. They may call her "Angel of Death," or ask incredulously, "Why do you do it?" She counters the comments calmly. She tells them simply that she gets more than she gives.