

STORY: Kennewick hospice volunteer learns how to live

By Sara Schilling, Herald staff writer



Herald/Bob Brawdy - Chuck Watson, comforts his mother, Lyn Rosler, while Mitizi, Rosler's longtime canine companion, curls up on her chest in a room on Monday Oct. 5 at the Hospice House in Kennewick. Watson's sister Kippy Myers of Eltopia describes him as "the rock of the family." Rosler passed away Oct. 7. See story below.

Gallery: Hospice 11th hour volunteer

KENNEWICK -- The watercolor of a bouquet of flowers that hangs in Chuck Watson's living room was the second-most valuable gift his friend George Walker gave him.

The most precious was a lesson Watson leans on every day -- that he doesn't have to be afraid to die.

That even if the malignant cells he's been fighting for 10 years start to spread again, he'll be OK.

It was a hard lesson to learn. When Watson, 59, of Kennewick, was first diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer and told he didn't have long to live, he panicked. He didn't want to leave his family and couldn't imagine his body shutting down.

But instead of running from death, he began volunteering for [Hospice at The Chaplaincy](#) in Kennewick, a service that provides end of life care. He hoped that being near others who were terminally ill would help him face his own fear.

That's how he met George, an artist who made a career of capturing on canvas the beauty he saw in nature. George painted the watercolor not long before he died.

When Watson looks at it now, he thinks of his friend -- and he no longer feels so afraid.

After the cancer diagnosis, "I couldn't get (death) out of my head. It scared me more than any treatment," Watson said.

"Unexpectedly, (facing death) was the beginning of a new journey of learning how to live."

'I SEE HIM'

Everyone dies.

In America, more than 2.4 million people died last year alone. That's more than 47,000 people a week or 6,700 a day.

Most spend their last hours in hospitals or nursing homes. Experts say that's one reason Americans are so scared of death.

It used to be that no child reached adulthood without watching a loved one become sick and die. The older relative would slip away at home, cared for by family.

But modern life brought advances in medicine. People are living longer and battling illnesses in hospital beds surrounded by machines and doctors.

Discussion of death has become almost taboo.

Watson never thought much about dying until he was diagnosed in February 1999. He'd gone to the doctor for a routine physical and got a phone call a few days later summoning him to a follow-up visit.

His wife, Dawn, went with him. The diagnosis was hard on her and Watson's other relatives, who'd always looked to him for support.

"He's like a rock of the family. Everyone leans on him. My aunts and uncles and grandma, even on my mom's side of the family -- they all call my dad," said his son Trevor, 37.

Watson couldn't sleep and started having panic attacks. As an elementary school principal, he was used to being in charge, but cancer left him feeling powerless.

So he began educating himself, reading every book and magazine about the disease he could find. He switched to a special diet and even enlisted his students at Vista Elementary in Kennewick to blend organic drinks of fruits and vegetables.

He also wanted to learn more about the process of death and decided to become a hospice volunteer.

After training, Watson was assigned his first patient, a World War II veteran. The man was living at home -- hospice provides both in-patient and at-home care -- and Watson started dropping by each week.

They talked about their families. Watson learned the man had been at the Battle of the Bulge and helped liberate a concentration camp.

Eventually, the man grew weaker and moved to Hospice House on West Entiat Avenue. Watson visited him there the day before he died.

The man was restless and kept reaching out in front of him. He was talking, but his family wasn't sure what he was trying to say.

The next day, the man's wife called Watson with the news her husband had died. Watson asked if she was OK, and she -- surprisingly -- said yes.

She said her husband, who'd seemed so agitated and uneasy just hours before, had straightened up in bed in his last moments.

"He said, 'I see him. He's there. I'm going to go to him,' " Watson remembered her saying.

She believed her husband was talking about Jesus. Soon after, he died.

"That's when I started really believing there's something after this life," Watson said, his voice catching in his throat even a decade later. "(I began to understand) that death can be a peaceful thing. You don't have to be afraid."

SUFFERING IS THE ENEMY

The Chaplaincy has provided hospice services in the Tri-Cities for nearly 30 years. It's part of a larger movement aimed at improving the quality of life for the dying.

Some think of hospice care as a last resort for hopeless cases, but Chaplaincy workers say that's off the mark.

Patients often live some of their best days in hospice because they're reconnecting with loved ones, making amends and savoring the time they have left, the workers said.

"(Modern) medicine often uses battlefield terminology when it comes to disease," said Dr. Tom Cooper, medical director of Hospice at The Chaplaincy.

But in hospice, death isn't the enemy -- suffering is, he said. The goal is to make patients comfortable and help them find peace.

Each patient receiving hospice care through The Chaplaincy is attended by a physician, a nurse, an aide, a social worker and -- if they want -- a nondenominational chaplain. There also are volunteers, like Watson, whose job it is to be a listening ear or quiet presence for patients and families.

Watson sometimes sees a patient only once or twice. Other times, he's able to form a relationship over weeks or longer.

That's what happened with George Walker, the 92-year-old Pasco artist who moved into Hospice House four months before he died. Watson started dropping by George's room.

The two couldn't have been more different. Watson is tall and tan, with an athletic build that makes him look ready to jump into a touch football game at a moment's notice.

George was several inches shorter with a slight build and a shock of white hair. He'd scraped out a living selling his vivid oil and watercolor paintings.

His favorite subjects were flowers, especially roses. He admired their beauty and labored to capture them just right, his careful brush strokes blending and shading to make the buds pop off the canvas.

The men had plenty to talk about. Like Watson, the dying artist had cancer.

George didn't want to be at Hospice. He was so unhappy at first that he once yelled at his niece, Peggy McNeill of Pasco, when she re-arranged the flowers in his room.

But having Watson there helped, McNeill said. He understood the uncertainty and fear that George was feeling.

They read together. Watson told George about his own illness, and the older man offered advice -- even referring Watson to his doctor.

The artist told stories from his long life. When he was a young man he spent six months in Europe working for an art dealer.

He carried pencils and a notepad in his pocket so during his free time he could sketch the buildings and wildlife he saw. Watson remembers George saying he even sold a piece to a member of a royal family.

George eventually started painting at Hospice. McNeill brought his paints and brushes, and there was plenty of inspiration. George's room looked out on a courtyard that's filled with rose bushes.

When George entered Hospice, Watson was getting doses of chemotherapy and still showing up to school each day. But he didn't let the exhaustion he felt stop him from visiting the artist.

"George said, 'I like it when you're here. I feel peaceful,'" Watson remembered. "That meant a lot to me."

FINDING PEACE

Watson shares a special designation with a few others at Hospice: He's an 11th Hour volunteer, specially trained to work with patients who don't have family or friends to be with them at the end.

There are times he's the last person a patient talks with before dying.

For Watson and other Hospice workers, death is part of the job. But they still sometimes shake their heads at its mysteries.

They've had patients hold on for days past when they were expected to die to see a relative traveling from far away once more. They've watched people suffering from dementia have final lucid conversations.

And they've known patients who swear they've glimpsed a long-dead loved one waiting for them on the other side.

Some look to religion for an explanation.

Those who work, volunteer and are patients at Hospice come from different religious backgrounds, or none at all. They have different beliefs about what happens after death.

Most Americans -- nearly three-quarters, according to a survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in Washington, D.C. -- think there is a heaven. But what it looks like depends on their world view.

Eastern religions -- such as Hinduism and Buddhism -- tend toward belief in reincarnation, or a cycle of rebirth that ends when a person achieves enlightenment. In Western faiths -- such as Christianity -- it's generally believed the soul leaves the body at death but then lives on.

There also are many across countries and cultures who believe life ends at death.

Cooper, who's been medical director of Hospice for about eight years, said his experience has taught him there's more to living and dying than science has yet been able to explain.

"Think of it like this," he said. "One minute a person is standing there breathing, thinking, talking, feeling. The next minute they're hit by a bus and killed. Their body hasn't gone away -- it's still there, the arms, legs, the weight. But something has changed. The person is gone. That's the immeasurable, unnamable part of us."

For Watson, it was the not knowing that was so hard.

Before cancer, he believed in God, but he wasn't used to asking for help and couldn't comprehend his own death.

As friends learned of his diagnosis, some said they'd pray for him. Though Watson had never been a religious man, that gave him some comfort.

One night as he was falling asleep he said a prayer of his own. Just a few sentences, asking God to take control.

He woke up later and looked at the clock. It was 3:12 a.m.

He braced for panic but instead felt peace.

"It was a deep peace, more than a feeling," he said. He didn't yet fully understand it, but it was the start of his new life.

Not long after he signed up to help Hospice.

THE LESSON OF HOSPICE

George Walker already had topped the average American's life expectancy by more than a decade when he entered Hospice House at age 92.

He'd traveled the world, painting in countries from Germany to Mexico. He had a studio in California where he sold his pieces and taught countless students the satisfaction of creating something beautiful with their own hands.

His last art exhibit was 1 1/2 months before he died.

Hospice workers cordoned off an area for his work, and guests were invited to admire the detailed paintings. The artist made some special pieces for his caregivers at Hospice.

George was a generous man who tried to help others, said McNeill, his niece. As a devout Seventh-day Adventist, he believed there would be life after death.

In his months at Hospice, George took stock of himself. He never married or had children, and he talked about that, explaining he didn't feel he could support them on an artist's earnings.

He told McNeill stories she'd never heard about his parents -- her grandparents. He read books, studied the Bible and told jokes that made Hospice workers laugh.

He made amends and made peace.

He painted and admired the roses.

McNeill said she thinks he liked the flower because of its gentle beauty. But roses also are hardy.

They're perennials, which means they shut down in winter's cold to wait for spring. A cut from one bush can be used to grow another, so there are roses blooming in America today with roots tracing back to the Civil War.

They're also symbolic, with deep meaning in different religions and cultures.

In Victorian England, people used roses to express what they couldn't say in words. Floriography is still alive today, with colors representing different ideas: Red for love, yellow for friendship, white for innocence and -- in some interpretations -- peach for eternal life.

George died at Hospice House on Dec. 19, 2006. McNeill was at his side.

She has several of his paintings hanging in her Pasco home -- watercolors, oils and sketches. George always insisted quality art be put in quality frames, so she's tried to buy ones that set off the tones and nuances of his pieces.

McNeill said her uncle taught her about the value of getting to know your elders, of learning from them and showing them love while you can.

And that death is a natural part of life, like the shedding of leaves.

Watson feels the same way. He said George was a teacher, but instead of showing him how to render the soft edge of a rose petal, the artist -- and other Hospice patients -- taught Watson how to face death.

And that taught him how to live.

UNDERSTANDS THE PAIN

It's been 10 years since Watson got his life-changing diagnosis. He's gone through surgery and chemotherapy. He's seen doctors in Tri-Cities and Seattle.

For the last six years, he's been treated by a Los Angeles physician who's had success with an unconventional blend of medications.

Watson still has tumors in his abdomen, but they're not growing. For now, he seems to have beaten the odds.

But he said that's secondary to the inner changes he's made.

Before cancer, Watson said, he loved his family but didn't always put them first. He measured success by how many awards he won or how much money he made. He discounted the deeper parts of life.

Now he sees the world differently, thanks to the lesson he learned at Hospice.

He needed that lesson a few weeks ago when his mother, Lyn Rosler, became too ill to stay at her home in Kennewick. Rosler had Parkinson's disease, and Watson moved her to Hospice House on Oct. 5. He was with her when she died two days later.

Rosler, 85, lived a full life. She raised six children, delighted in her grandkids and great-grandkids, danced, traveled and had adventures.

Her family was prepared for her death, but it still hurt so much to say goodbye, Watson said.

He understands the pain of death better than most. That's why he no longer sees his cancer as a curse.

The disease gave him a deadline to settle his affairs, spend time with his family and find God, he said. It taught him it's more important to be spiritually and emotionally healed than physically cured, because that's what lasts through winter and into spring.

"Fortunately, I learned that lesson before I was on (my deathbed)," he said. "I'll always be grateful for that lesson."

If he forgets, all he has to do is look around. His house is filled with family photographs, and it's often filled with laughter because the Watsons have a regular Sunday family dinner.

And on a wall in the corner, not far from the kitchen table, is the watercolor in a handsome frame. It's a still life of a bouquet of roses, picked from the courtyard at Hospice.

Thanks to George's mastery, the buds pop out -- the yellow, pink, white and peach flowers bathed in light from an unseen window.

From a few feet back, the colors seem to blend together, twisting and turning, they go on and on.

-- Sara Schilling: 509-582-1402; sschilling@tricityherald.com

11TH HOUR VOLUNTEERS HELP AT END OF LIFE

Chuck Watson is one of Hospice at The Chaplaincy's 11th Hour volunteers. But he's not the only one.

There are about nine others who also are specially trained to serve as a calm presence during a patient's final hours.

The volunteers sometimes are called out of bed late at night or early in the morning to do their work.

Their job is to provide comfort. Sometimes they put on a CD or read to a patient; other times they simply hold the patient's hand.

The program started at Hospice at The Chaplaincy in 2005 as a way to ensure the terminally ill have the support they need and that no one dies alone.

In some cases, the patients don't have anyone but an 11th Hour volunteer to be with them at the end. In other cases, the volunteers are there to help family members who are scared and don't know what to expect as their loved one dies.

Volunteers say the work is far from depressing. Instead, it's meaningful and life-affirming.

"It can be really special in that you can provide support during one of the most important moments in life," said Judy Westerberg, social services supervisor for Hospice at The Chaplaincy.

The 11th Hour workers are part of a corps of about 100 volunteers who help make the hospice program run. Volunteers do everything from wash linens to help patients eat their meals.

They come from different backgrounds. Some hospice volunteers are still in high school, while others are retirees in their 80s.

Chaplaincy also has volunteers who fill roles outside Hospice. Some do clerical work at the administrative offices and others paint or keep up the flowers at the facility.

Chaplaincy also has a children's grief center called Cork's Place that relies on volunteers to help its young clients. Those volunteers go through more intense training to become facilitators at the center.

For information on how to become a Chaplaincy volunteer, call 783-7416.

-- On the Net: www.tcchaplains.org

-- Sara Schilling: 509-582-1402; sschilling@tricityherald.com

Read more: <http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2009/11/08/784898/kennewick-hospice-volunteer-learns.html#ixzz0nXuvBHEz>