

Hospice nurses give compassion to those in dying days

By Dori O'Neal, Herald staff writer

Kristi Szendre, a hospice nurse for the Tri-Cities Chaplaincy, chose that as the title of an essay about why she chose to be a hospice nurse. The Kennewick High graduate's work earned her the top prize in a contest sponsored by the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

Szendre said she chose to administer to the dying for many reasons.

"Most people think death is a horrible thing, but it doesn't have to be," Szendre said. "When I worked at a nursing home I watched people who were forgotten or discarded, debilitate and die with virtually no support.

"Many nurses wanted to be more attentive but were required to pass meds and perform treatments on a level that did not allow time for compassionate care of someone living their last days," she said.

That's much more heartbreaking than the inevitability of death, she said.

When Szendre talks about hospice work, the words spill from the heart. She doesn't see herself as unique, and says all hospice nurses provide the same compassionate care to people whose lives are coming to an end.

One challenge she faces is patients who are afraid to die and harshly react to their caregivers, she said, sharing the story of a man to whom she provided hospice care about five years ago. She also told his story in her essay.

"Charlie" had no family or friends who came to visit him during his illness, and he struggled with the reality of his condition by fighting his caregivers.

"He was cantankerous, ornery and sometimes downright cruel," Szendre said. "It was difficult to approach him to give medicine because there would usually be a cutting remark, an evil glare behind his eyes. It didn't matter how much I smiled and cajoled, he just wouldn't have any of it."

But Szendre wasn't about to give up on Charlie, even when his condition worsened and he became even meaner. Fear of death can have a powerful effect on someone who knows their time on Earth is coming to an end, she said.

"I watched him struggle for air and continue to battle everyone who tried to come near him," Szendre said. "One evening I simply caved in to my own frustration and demanded, 'Charlie! Why do you fight everyone who is trying to help you? Why do you turn everyone into an enemy?'"

She expected him to fling a tirade of words her way, but the dying man didn't say a word.

"That was the most profound reaction I'd ever seen Charlie give," Szendre said. "I walked back to his bedside and sat in a chair while he stared at the wall."

Then she quietly asked him if he was afraid to die.

The simple question broke through his tough exterior and he finally gave in to the reality of his situation and accepted her help. She spent the next few weeks sitting at his bedside.



Hospice nurse Kristi Szendre shows a soft and caring touch by sitting on the floor and listening to questions by patient John Gayda during a recent visit at his Burbank home. Szendre recently won a national contest for an essay she wrote called Death, like Birth, Can be a Beautiful Thing, about the work she does as a hospice care nurse.

"One night he grabbed my arm with a strength I had not felt in many days, pulling me to him (in a hug)," Szendre said.

As she hugged him back, she felt his tears against her cheek. He seemed to know his time was near so she continued to hold him in her arms until he drew his last breath.

"It was a slow and beautiful process," she said. "There was agony, and what seemed like insufferable waiting, ending with a sense of ultimate achievement and contentment. And he wasn't alone.

"It's never easy to watch someone die, but it's also a wonderful thing to be able to help someone get down that road with love and compassion."

Bette Cooper, executive director of the Chaplaincy, said hospice nurses are not hired. They are called.

"This is special work and it takes special people like Kristi with compassionate hearts who feel called to work with the dying and their families," Cooper said. "When I read Kristi's essay, I was not surprised. I could just picture her there, holding Charlie as he died."

John Gayda, 88, of Burbank, has been under Szendre's care for a few months. As his time winds down, his 78-year-old wife, Polly, is grateful for Szendre's visits with her husband.

"I know something's going to happen, but I don't know when or what to do," Polly Gayda said. "Kristi helps us so much during this very depressing time. She listens patiently to John's concerns and helps us tremendously in preparing us for what's going to happen."

Szendre earned her nursing degree in 1995 from Columbia Basin College and worked in nursing homes and hospitals before switching to hospice six years ago.

Her manner is relaxed and attentive.

She recommends five things people should consider doing before they die.

"It's important to say, 'I forgive you.' 'Do you forgive me?' 'I love you.' 'Thank you.' But, most importantly, you need to forgive yourself," Szendre said.

"I absolutely love the work I do," she said. "And even though there is a great sadness that comes with the death of a loved one, if there's a chance I can help that person and their family through it any better, then I have to try."

But Szendre also has had moments when the heartache of helping people die was overwhelming. But when that happens, she knows what to do.

"Sometimes profound things will impact you, and when that happens you've just got to stop what you're doing and go watch the goats," she said with a knowing smile.

"When someone asks, 'How can you?' I tell them every morning my soul sings, 'How can I not?' " After all, death, like birth, can be a beautiful thing.