

Brattleboro area hospice men are all in it together

By BECKY KARUSH

Posted: 06/17/2011 03:00:00 AM EDT



*Six of the men of Brattleboro Area Hospice, from left to right: Ryan Murphy, Greg McAllister, Richard Ewald, Rob Hinrichs, Stewart McDermott and Bill Schmidt. (Bob Audette/Reformer)
Friday June 17, 2011*

BRATTLEBORO -- Six men, five Brattleboro Area Hospice volunteers and one staff person, sit in a room for an hour, talking about dying, talking about death.

They talk about God. They talk about stillness. They talk about learning to be present in times of intense emotional need, about the simple actions of care.

They talk about how hospice work has traditionally been done by women.

The conversation is better than the best television, better than a play.

It is the sound of hawk wings. Their talk is the nightingale's song.

"You know, I talked to Greg last night because I didn't actually want to show up today." Stewart McDermott, a hospice volunteer since 1986, nods at his friend and fellow volunteer Greg McAllister of Putney.

Stewart lays an arm across the back of the sofa he is sitting on, gently holding back a white curtain floating up against his face. "I thought, what is this all about, something like, 'Men of Hospice,'" he intones in mock-superhero voice.

The other men laugh. "The calendar shoot is next," jokes Richard Ewald of Putney, who recently completed the 11-week volunteer training in providing practical, emotional, non-medical support for dying people and their families across much of Windham County and neighboring New Hampshire towns.

"With hard hats!" adds Greg.

Stewart laughs, too, then continues. He is passionate and serious.

"But the thing is, why should it be just men? It's men and women, our Hospice Neighbors. Actually in hospice, women do the majority of caring and loving and sharing, and I think men miss out on a lot."

"Though, it's nice to highlight the men of hospice, because it lets other men know that volunteering is something they can do," says Rob Hinrichs of Guilford. He first trained as a volunteer in 1988, not long after he'd lost a grandmother, his father, his dairy farm business, and his marriage. Training for hospice work was, he says, an instinctual decision.

"Good point," Stewart nods.

In a nearby wooden chair, Bill Schmidt, who owns Elysian Hills Tree Farm in Dummerston with his wife, Mary Lou, turns to Stewart. He speaks in a rasped and sonorous voice, his bearing as gentle and strong as a willow tree.

"And men are really important in hospice work, I think. I've worked with 36 different people over 21 years, and two-thirds of my clients were men. A lot of men who are dying would like to see at least one man as a volunteer."

"I would agree," says Rob. Like the others, he extends a calm, kind, and vibrant presence into the room.

"I'm not putting down women, of course," says Bill. "I'm just saying that men have a place relating to men in hospice work, that's all."

"Aren't these guys amazing?" asks Rich. "This work, the ability to be with people, sometimes to just be a caring presence in the room, in an emotional, stressful situation, it's not gender-based, but you have to be able to make yourself emotionally vulnerable to do it. And men in our culture typically do not do that."

He shifts in his corner of the couch, leaning forward slightly. "The broad brush might say, oh, you're getting in touch with your feminine side. That's ridiculous! Think of the courage, the masculine courage, it takes to make yourself vulnerable in order to be with someone else who is at the most vulnerable place in their lives!"

To his right, Ryan Murphy nods. "That was well put, Rich."

Ryan is the Hospice Care Coordinator at Brattleboro Area Hospice, which has provided free, all-volunteer services since its founding in 1979. Once part of a thriving national hospice volunteer movement that was radically changed when Medicare began paying for medical hospice care in the mid-1980s, it is now one of just 200 non-medical volunteer-based organizations across the country.

"Out of 111 Hospice volunteers," he says, "twenty are men. I guess I can only hope the numbers will increase -- there are a lot more male nurses now than there were 25 years ago, and lots more women physicians, so something is happening."

Silence settles over the group. The men make no motion to change it, long practiced in riding the ebbs and flows of human exchange.

Greg inclines his head, ready to speak. He has been interested in death and spirituality since his grandmother, his closest ally in the family, died when he was young. He joined Hospice in 2005.

"There's a certain kind of relationship that can happen between men who are committed to something beyond the macho thing," he says. The others listen carefully.

"I experienced it early in life when I was 16, studying to be a priest, with all these guys who held this ideal to give their life to God somehow. However we all dispersed over the years, we still have this incredible bond.

"I really missed that connection when I left that place, and I find that again here, where there are guys who are willing to talk about real stuff and open up."

Stewart jumps in. "He touches on something that is primary for me -- THIS is the important stuff in my life. This study of human connection, caring, knowing more about the mystery of life and death, this is the important stuff, and if I can spend time with somebody, male or female, talking about this, if we can help each other along the way, with love, then I think I'm doing all right! This is the valuable stuff."

Bill smiles, adding that while hospice work can include powerful emotional connections and moving discussions of death and the afterlife, a lot of it is also mundane: making lunch, filling out forms, running errands.

"One man," he remembers, "had taught himself to play piano. He hadn't had an awful lot of formal education. He'd made a tape of himself playing, and he wanted to share it with four or five people. So for him I made copies of the tape."

He remembers another man in his 30s dying of AIDS.

"I was with him maybe an hour and a quarter. He was smoking away, and he would doze off, and he didn't say much except, 'I'm dying, I know I'm dying.'

"He died the next day. That was it -- that was Hospice's whole connection with him. His only relative was a mother who had her own baggage, so she couldn't be there, so he was pretty much alone. Sometimes you are so humbled, because there's nothing to say. You're just there."

"You never know just what the situation is going to hold," says Ryan. He came to hospice work in 1985, death having been a part of how he experiences the world and part of his spirituality since his mother died when he was four.

"Because it's true," he continues, "we do go in and do just be with the situation, but there is that deeper connection, because the context is, I'm here because you're facing the end of your life. It's not usually spoken of, but it's still part of our relationship -- this is why we're here together. And we can oftentimes give assurance to families, even if it's just implicit -- we've been here before, and we know that you can get through this."

"And sometimes you end up watching the Shopping Network together," Greg grins.

"Or Jerry Springer!" chorus several voices.

"And that's okay, too!" laughs Stewart. "Sometimes distraction is the best thing!"

"And we're all participating in this journey to the mystery," says Bill, echoing a theme Rob sounded earlier. "You're a little ahead of me, Lord knows what might happen -- I could be there tomorrow -- but we're all going together."

And with that, together, the six men of hospice go out into the summer's bird-filled day.

Learn more about Brattleboro Area Hospice's volunteer hospice and bereavement services, including the longer term Pathways Program, at 191 Canal St., Brattleboro, www.brattleborohospice.org, or 802-257-0775.

Becky Karush is a regular contributor to the Reformer. To suggest people for this column, write to her at reformer.ourneighbors@gmail.com.



About this column ...

In our busy world, only the most sensational people get our attention — the crazy politician, the prize-winning scientist, the earthquake survivor. But we all have stories to tell. They often appear unremarkable, just another bead on a string of days. Yet when we look deeper, the stories of our neighbors, relatives, and friends reveal to us the tenacity and beauty of the human spirit.

This column celebrates our stories — the woman who's baked pies at the local church for 20 years, the young man who builds sculptures from old bikes, the retired guy who still works part time for the town — and we invite you to suggest to us people whose tales we should tell.

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