

Video: Hospice patients embrace life

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The portraits radiate beauty and joy. They exude hope and peace. They tell the stories of men and women who embrace life, even in death. Local photographers captured the vibrant personalities and unending spirits of a dozen local hospice patients in striking black and white.

"It's very powerful. It shows emotions well," said Susan May, a photographer who participated in the documentary project directed by Willamette Valley Hospice. "You're not distracted by the colors of what they're wearing. You eliminate all that and get down to the basics, and that's just the person."

The Faces of Hospice exhibit will be unveiled next week at Cafe Noir and be on display through November, which is National Hospice Month.

"You'd think it would be depressing, but it's not. It's quite the opposite," said Dave Moss, a board member at Willamette Valley Hospice. "It's actually very life-affirming. There's a dignity that comes across, a peace that comes across, and it's not something you would normally expect."

Organizers plan to use the exhibit to help educate the community about Willamette Valley Hospice, which is commemorating its 30th anniversary, and the services it offers. The nonprofit organization was started by a group of volunteers who were compelled to care for and support nine terminally ill patients and their families.

Today Willamette Valley Hospice cares for about 200 patients a day.

The Faces of Hospice project evolved after Moss and his wife, Pat, saw a similar exhibit at a hotel where they were staying last Thanksgiving in Port Townsend, Wash.

"The photos just drew you in," Dave Moss said.

He brought a brochure home with him and later presented the idea to the Willamette Valley Hospice board and executive director Linda Downey.

"Linda, like she always does, she ran with it," Moss said.



Diane Stevenson | Statesman Journal

About hospice

Willamette Valley Hospice is a nonprofit organization that provides comprehensive social, physical and spiritual services for those facing terminal illness, bereavement and loss

Where: 1015 Third St. NW, Salem

Who: People are eligible if they have a terminal diagnosis from a physician and live in Marion or Polk counties or within a 35-mile radius of the hospice office.

How: A person must have a doctor's referral to begin hospice care services, but patients, family and friends are encouraged to initiate the process by contacting the organization.

Cost: Benefits are covered by Medicare and many insurance plans. With the support of community funds and donations, the organization accepts and serves all patients regardless of their ability to pay.

Contact: (503) 588-3600

The exhibit

The Faces of Hospice photo exhibit is presented by Willamette Valley Hospice. The opening will include local wine tasting, chocolates, appetizers and live music.

Patients were referred for the project by hospice staff, and gave their consent to be photographed. Community development manager Linda Hays and Latino outreach coordinator Wenonoa Spivak interviewed the participants and wrote short stories that will accompany the portraits in the exhibit.

When: 6 to 8 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Cafe Noir, 610 Marion St. NE, Salem

"It was such a juxtaposition," Spivak said. "They were so full of life, but on hospice. It was so impactful."

The three local photographers who captured the powerful images were just as moved by the project, especially May, whose mother was terminally ill at the time.

"My goal was to visit with them, to make them feel comfortable with me being there, and to capture them in a positive light," said May, who operates Susan May Photography out of her home. "It was very rewarding."

Her mother, Thelma Deppe, later received hospice services and died Sept. 12 after a long illness.

"They were outstanding, supportive to both me and my father during this difficult time," May said.

Diane Stevenson, multi-media editor at the Statesman Journal, and Martin Giovannini, of Full Frame Photography, also contributed to the project.

Stevenson did portraits of six patients and a caregiver. They included a pediatric nurse, an elementary school teacher and a World War II veteran. They suffered from cancer, pulmonary disease and Alzheimer's, yet seemed so happy in the photographs.

"They were all so upbeat," Stevenson said. "To me, dying is a big negative, but all of these people turned it into a positive."

She hit it off with Janice Krause, a former pediatric nurse from Salem.

"She was around my age and I thought, 'Wow, if I get to that point, I hope I have her attitude,'" Stevenson said. "All of them were so at peace with themselves. I feel grateful to have met them."

Hospice officials hope the images show local people "living their passions and cherishing their special moments in their final days as they live, love and play."

"That's really the whole essence of hospice care," Hays said. "They can live life all the way to the very end, and enjoy their life."

Hospice provides social, physical and spiritual services to patients and their families. It can take place at the patient's home, in an assisted living facility, or at a nursing home. A patient must have a doctor's referral to begin services, which are covered by Medicare and many insurance plans.

Willamette Valley Hospice offers music therapy, massage therapy, pet therapy, bereavement support and Spanish-language resources.

"We are fairly cutting-edge, doing some of the things larger hospices are doing," Hays said.

The Faces of Hospice project is just their latest endeavor, and they envision it as an ongoing project. It will be used as a traveling exhibit, to educate the community on the benefits of hospice care. After Cafe Noir, it will be on display in January at the Oregon Department of Human Services.

While the subject of death can be difficult, hospice officials urge members of the community to go see the exhibit. Go see the faces of Janice Krause, the nurse, of Merle Koker, the teacher, and of Walter Bowden, the veteran, and all the others.

Most of them are no longer are with us, but their personalities and their spirits live on through their portraits.

"When people get that final diagnosis, it's easy to say, 'Well, these people are going to be sad, they're going to be depressed all the time,'" Moss said. "But hospice, its job is to go out and help them deal with it and deal with it in a very humane way.

"I think these photographers have captured not just the action of that humanity, but also the results of it. It really comes through."

"Forward This" appears Mondays and Thursdays and highlights the people, places and organizations of the Mid-Willamette Valley. To share a story, contact Capi Lynn at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6710.