

My Experience as a Hospice Volunteer

By Cedric B. Theus

"I don't think I can do it," I said, after being invited to join the hospice program at the Iowa State Penitentiary in 2006. My self-confidence was still a work in progress and taking care of someone who was terminally ill seemed beyond my ability. I understood the magnitude of such a job and I did not want to fail at it.

"I felt the same way at first," responded the man who had just graduated from the first class of volunteers. "But I thought about it; who would I want at my bedside when it's my time to go? A staff member or someone who knows what it's like to do time. Who would you want?" That conversation changed my life.

I realized that I had a decision to make. Could I expect another man to do something for me that I was not willing to do for him or others? No, I could not. I was not raised like that. That is not what a responsible man does. Life Without Parole meant that I would likely die in prison. That was my reality. I could not escape that fact, nor could I escape the feeling that I had to do something to make my life more meaningful. I filed an application to become a hospice volunteer, and after a grilling interview, I was accepted into the second class of trainees.

The training that we received from Marylin Sales, Sue Mangles, Jo Watson, and Sharon Demers was intense. Marylin was tough in a compassionate way. She asked hard questions. There was no sitting in the class without being fully engaged. Marylin would call you out. She wanted to make sure that we knew what we were doing. The gravity of caring for a dying man in a prison setting, and the unique challenges that a prison hospice would entail, was an important point of emphasis. Misbehavior would not be tolerated, whether inside the program or out on the yard. Marylin needed to be able to trust that each member of the hospice team was prepared for what was ahead. She was a great coach. She had a way of finding out what you were made of, and if you did not meet the standard that she required of each volunteer, you were decisively cut from the team. None of us was bigger than the program, nor were we more important than the man in the bed was.

My first patient made me feel human again. I needed that after having spent over a decade in prison. I was no longer just inmate #1095072; I was not a convicted murderer. I was just a man who was honored to be of assistance to another man as he experienced the last days of his journey here on earth. The patient was scared, and for reasons less important than his, so was I.

Hospice/ADL training helped me through most of the experience. My humanity got me through the rest. The patient thanked me for every little thing that I did for him. Initially I brushed it off as him being courteous. I told him that he didn't need to thank me. I was grateful for the opportunity to be there for him. It was gratifying to be able to do something for someone else in such a pure way.

Later, I realized that he was thanking me because he completely understood the significance of having a hospice volunteer by his side. He understood what the alternative was. Eventually so did I. The thought of someone dying alone in a prison cell provided me with the mettle I would need to get through the tough times and embrace my duty as a hospice volunteer wholeheartedly.

Hospice care was not easy. From the first man that I cared for, to the tenth, each patient brought his own unique challenges and rewards. Occasionally we would get a patient who did not want to accept the fact that he was dying, or that he needed help to do things that he had done

for himself for most of his life. It was distressing to tell an adult that he could not take a shower by himself, or use the bathroom without assistance. I felt like a bully at times.

"You're just doing this because you're stronger than me," one man protested as I washed him despite his objections. In the end, even the most challenging patients would submit to the care and express some level of gratitude. Moreover, when the words thank you could not be articulated, I could see it in their eyes or demeanor. One particular individual simply grabbed my hand and nodded. That gesture was worth more than any words he could have possibly uttered.

Some of the deaths were hard to watch. They are permanently imprinted into my memory. As I watched my first difficult death, I immediately thought of the death penalty and those who are emphatically opposed to the barbarity of it. However, there were no intravenous concoctions to ease the suffering that this man went through at the end of his life. There were no protests outside the prison this day. No, this was not an execution. In some ways it seemed worse.

Our hospice team managed his physical discomfort as best as we could. The nurses were great in instructing us on the tricks of the trade. But I was left to deal with the emotional suffering, the regrets, the missed opportunities in life that was unique to each individual, on my own. I shared in that suffering, albeit to a much lesser degree; and the prisoner-to-prisoner bond that connected me to each man seemed to bring a level of compassion to the situation that a non-prisoner could not replicate. Having to bear witness to a man struggling through his last moments of life, in prison, made my own Life sentence a stark reality.

After a patient passed away, most of the volunteers who cared for him would gather in his room to prepare the body for the funeral home. This too was an honor. I had never felt more alive, more grateful than at those moments. I felt that each man deserved the best I had to offer. I would always find myself thinking of things I could have done better during my care. I understood that I was not a perfect person and therefore could never be a perfect volunteer; I had to find a way to get past my mistakes. There would never be a second chance to make things right.

I have since lost track of how many patients I cared for in the hospice program. The experience, the life lessons, and the gift of seeing sincere appreciation in the eyes of a dying man, will always remain with me. Please understand that these words cannot express how being a hospice volunteer has changed my life. My experience can only be quantified by how I now appreciate my own life and the lives of others. You can see it in how I value my loved ones, and through my burning desire to help those in need.