

## Hospice helps grieving families

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SEGUIN — While commonly portrayed in movies and television, death and dying are tougher to cope with in real life.

Don Stewart found that out when his 53-year-old wife, Judy, was diagnosed with terminal metastatic cancer last month. Judy fell in the yard just before Christmas and couldn't get up. After a series of tests, doctors estimate she has only three to six months to live.

“If doctors, chemotherapy and radiation can't help her, what do you do?” Don said. “It was such a shock. I retired last year and lost my health insurance. They sent me something saying I could keep my insurance for \$800 a month, but who can afford that?”

Don searched for help, going from agency to agency, and found that Judy did not qualify for most programs.

“I have really cut back on going places,” Don said. “I had hospice come out here Friday and I'll be filling out the papers. Right now I can handle her and I can feed and bathe her and give her medication. But down the road, if she deteriorates, I may need help.”

Don hopes that a miracle will save Judy's life, but has to prepare himself for the possibility that she may die.

Hospice services at Guadalupe Valley Hospital are designed to help people like Don

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and Judy.

Located across from the hospital at 215 Leonard St., it's a nonprofit agency that helps terminally ill patients maintain their personal dignity and quality of life while they cope with the dying process. It also helps family members during this difficult time.

"These families may have never gone through something like this before," said Kristy Serold, hospice clinical coordinator. "Many of them are very dedicated to honoring the patient's wishes, and staying at home is a very common wish."

Established in 1990, hospice serves about 150 terminally ill patients each year. The hospice team includes the patient's doctor, nurses, nurse aides, therapists, chaplains, social workers and volunteers. Hospice can provide medications needed for pain relief and comfort and equipment like hospital beds or wheel chairs.

The services are paid for by Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance but is not charged to the families. Services for uninsured patients are paid for by donations and by an annual fund-raising Hospice Gala.

"The patient and their families choose what services they want to use," said Debby Hernandez, director of GVH home health and hospice services. "All the patients receive nursing care, but some also want help from the therapists or the chaplain or social workers."

More than 50 volunteers also help by sitting with patients or reading to them or helping out in the hospice office.

"We can always use more volunteers," Hernandez said. "They can serve as much or as little as they like. It's very flexible and all volunteers receive training. Many of our volunteers have gone through the death of a loved one and want to help others during this difficult time."

For those serving as hospice nurses, it is difficult because their patients usually die.

"It's a calling for each of my nurses," Serold said. "It's being at the right place, doing what we need to be doing at the right time. It's a difficult job, a very emotionally trying job, but it's also an emotionally rewarding job. If we can provide any form of comfort to someone in their last days, it's worth any effort we put forth."

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For more information about GVH hospice services or about volunteering, call 401-7561. A bank account to help Judy Stewart in her battle with cancer has been set up at Wells Fargo Bank.