

# Hospice Volunteers Provide Connection, Compassion



## It doesn't take long for Cally Prost to make a difference.

As a hospice volunteer for Intrepid USA Healthcare Services, Prost will spend up to an hour at a time with people receiving hospice care. In that hour, she touches their lives and knows her time has been well spent.

"Even if you only have a few hours to spare every month, you can make a big difference in those few hours," Prost said.

April is National Volunteer Month. It's a time when we as a nation take time to recognize the impact volunteers have on their communities. As a hospice volunteer, Prost is part of a nationwide network of compassionate Americans who make time to talk, laugh, and cry with individuals receiving hospice care.

For Myrna Beden and her husband, George, being hospice volunteers has allowed them to make real connections with others in their southwest Missouri community.

"It's a very fulfilling thing. The people we volunteer with are at the end of their lives, and sometimes they're sitting there with nothing to do, and we can come in and talk to them and let them know that we're interested in them and we get to know them," Beden said. "We pop in from time to time, and man, they just start smiling."

For Beden, volunteering with hospice is personal.

"I went through this with my mom," she said. "She had hospice and they would come in and help her and they would let us know where she was as far as her progression into this thing. It made us better able to understand what was coming next."

Although hospice volunteers are up close with individuals receiving hospice care, they do not do any direct care activities. Instead, their focus is on companionship and camaraderie.

"We go in and we just ask them questions about where they were born and what did they do in life, how many kids did they have," Beden said. "They start to open up and they feel more comfortable because they're able to talk to somebody about all the things they've done in life."

Beden's husband, a World War II veteran, connects with many people about their time serving in the military or their lives as military spouses. He can perform small pinning ceremonies, presenting another veteran with a pin and thanking them for their service.

"We have one person we're visiting right now who is just delightful, but she doesn't take her eyes off George," Beden said with a chuckle. "She really enjoys when we come, and she'll hold his hands and I'll joke that he's coming home with me, and she just laughs."

Although the focus is on companionship, as hospice volunteers spend time with a person, they can develop keen insight into things the care team would want to know.

"If you see they're not eating or have some pain they're complaining about, or maybe you see they're having trouble breathing, you can call and say this person needs help and Intrepid USA will send somebody out to help them," Beden said.

The people she visits can sometimes feel more comfortable in her presence than when they're with the professionals on their care team.

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"We're sitting there kind of cracking jokes or telling funny stories and you can tell they feel more relaxed," Beden said. "If I see them wince, I'll go, 'What's that all about? Are you OK?'"

She and all hospice volunteers receive thorough training before they ever come into contact with an individual receiving care.

"It's a safe way to grow and learn and be stretched," Prost said. "Intrepid USA has done a good job of training and equipping us. It's not difficult. It's just looking at someone with compassion, and we're all capable of doing that."

Sometimes, the person receiving hospice may not be up for a long visit, but volunteers may still stay for a few minutes to check in and ask how they're doing.

Other times, the person may be full of energy and wanting to look at family photo albums or play a game of cards.

"I look at magazines sometimes with the person I visit," Prost said. "I check out books from the library that I think would be interesting for her. I like to bring something with me that is a conversation starter or is just something different than what is available at the care facility she's in."

Beden said volunteering with hospice is not just beneficial for the person receiving hospice; she gets a lot out of it, too.

"It's good for your heart and good for your soul because that's what you're supposed to do in life," she said. "We're supposed to be concerned about other people and to just take care of one another in this world, and when you're volunteering, that's what you're doing."

For Prost, volunteering with hospice is a personal calling. She works at a college campus ministry and tries to encourage the young people she works with to get involved with hospice volunteering.

"I think that we don't really focus on end of life as a society and it's important and it matters how we treat people as they are in the transition process," she said. "It's important that we help provide dignity and kindness to people, regardless of what life stage they're in."

Beden, who has been helping with the program for several years, said she wouldn't change the experience for the world.

"When you're volunteering, you get to meet a whole bunch of really nice people and you get to talk with them and you know you're bringing them joy and making their day a little brighter," Beden said. "Some people tell me they couldn't do this because the person might die, but I say there's no might about it - that's why you're going there. They are dying, but you know what? So are we. It's up to us to make the best of it."