



Feeling Fit

Hospice volunteers go many extra miles

Published:

Wednesday, November 4, 2009 10:11 AM EST

Good Shepherd Hospice has approximately 700 volunteers in Polk, Highlands and Hardee counties.

But one Highlands County couple makes an extra effort to live that mission by driving nearly 100 miles round trip to Auburndale each week to visit terminally ill patients and their loved ones. That commitment is a concrete example of Dick and Linda Swenson's devotion to their community.

People know the Swensons because of their dedication to the Sun Room, a Sebring senior center, where Dick oversaw programs for the area's elderly, and Linda, a registered nurse, operated the clinic.

For 17 years, Sun Room volunteers offered Highland County seniors companionship, healthcare, meals and activities to help fill their days. But as other agencies offered competing services for older residents, the Sun Room lost valuable funding. When the Sun Room's board of directors realized that the center would no longer be able to operate, they offered the property to Good Shepherd Hospice and Samaritan Touch Care Center.

For the first time in many years, Dick, 66, and Linda, 61, found themselves with some time on their hands. But they didn't sit still for very long. They were drawn to Good Shepherd Hospice because both had personal histories with hospice over the years. Linda's 32-year-old sister died under hospice care in Kentucky. Dick's mother and father received Good Shepherd Hospice care in Sebring, and both have had friends who received compassionate hospice care at the end of life.

"We were committed to volunteering for Good Shepherd Hospice," said Linda. "But we were unsure of just exactly where to volunteer."

The Swensons contacted Good Shepherd Hospice Regional Director Becky McIntyre about their desire to volunteer. "Dick and Linda told me they wanted to become Good Shepherd Hospice volunteers," said Becky. "Because of their direct experiences, they can speak honestly about the value hospice can add to end-of-life care in our community."

After completing their volunteer training, Dick and Linda started seeing hospice patients. Dick sometimes ends his patient visits by playing hymns on his trumpet. Linda takes part in vigils to support families during the final hours of a patient's life.

But Linda and Dick also want to contribute to the future of Good Shepherd Hospice.

"They shared with me their dreams of volunteering in a hospice house in Highlands County,"

remembered Becky.

That's good news because last summer the state approved Good Shepherd Hospice's application to build the 12-bed Highlands County Hospice House on property on Hammock Road in Sebring.

At the hospice house, patients needing comprehensive pain control and symptom management will have a nearby state-of-the-art facility where they can receive compassionate care in a home-like setting.

"We know how important it is for hospice patients to have family and loved ones close by," said Becky. "All of us at Good Shepherd Hospice are thrilled that patients will receive specialized care right here in Highlands County that is specific to their unique needs, in serene surroundings, outside of a cold, institutional environment."

Dick and Linda want to be ready to volunteer when the new hospice house opens its doors, so they decided to prepare in advance. In addition to visiting patients in Highlands County, the couple now travels 100 miles round trip to volunteer at Good Shepherd Hospice's Forsythe Hospice House in Auburndale.

Why do they make the two-hour-and-40-minute round trip?

"We're only here to serve the Lord and to serve others," states Linda. "Providing peace, providing calm, providing integrity. That's the most you can give to another human being."

The Swensons start their weekly visits to the Forsythe Hospice House by checking in with the nursing staff. They get a feel for the atmosphere and say a prayer, "asking the Lord what he wants us to leave there."

Then Dick and Linda quietly walk the halls, engaging patients, families and friends in comforting conversations. Husbands and fathers have developed short, yet meaningful, relationships with Dick. "Sometimes I'm in the right place at the right time," said Dick. "On one visit recently, a gentleman poured out his heart to me. He was in a vulnerable position, and I think he was grateful to have another man to talk to."

The Swensons' focused dedication and calm demeanor has made a lasting impression on hospice staff and volunteers.

"Dick and Linda are priceless," said Nina Gilbert, Good Shepherd Hospice volunteer manager. "They support our mission not only by visiting patients but also by mentoring new volunteers. They are an inspiration to all of us."

Dick and Linda know that ultimately their weekly sacrifice of traveling to Auburndale will be a blessing for Highlands County families facing end-of-life issues "Sixty percent of our community is over 65 years old," said Dick.

Linda added, "Our community needs a hospice house desperately, and we're blessed to be able to support Good Shepherd Hospice in that effort."

Good Shepherd Hospice is a community-based, not-for-profit organization that supports approximately 700 patients each day in Polk, Highlands and Hardee County as they face the challenges of life-limiting illnesses. Healthcare professionals and trained volunteers embrace the Good Shepherd Hospice mission to make the most of life by relieving the suffering of

patients and their families affected by end-of-life issues.

The organization has been a part of the community since 1979 and is a 2008 recipient of a Circle of Life Citation of Honor Award. Good Shepherd Hospice is the only local agency offering hospice programs accredited by the Joint Commission, the nation's premier healthcare accrediting body. The United Way of Central Florida partially funds the community programs offered by Good Shepherd Hospice. For more information, visit the website at www.goodshepherdhospice.org

Copyright © 2009 - Lake Wales News

[x] Close Window