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Comfort and compassion within these walls

SEBRING, FLA. – On July 7, 25 staff and volunteers from Good Shepherd Hospice gathered at the construction site of the Bud and Donna Somers Hospice House and Resource Center in Sebring for a special – and unique – commemorative event. The group spent 90 minutes inscribing their thoughts on the unfinished interior walls of the building and leaving concealed messages of spiritual support, which some believe can be as essential to the structure as the steel and concrete supports.

Good Shepherd Hospice's Regional Director Becky McIntyre and Chaplain Jim Langham organized the event as a way to offer messages of comfort and hope for the patients, loved ones, staff and volunteers who will pass through the halls of the hospice house after its completion in early 2011.

Chaplain Langham started the wall writing project with a short prayer of inspiration but stressed that the purpose wasn't to anoint the building but rather to provide hidden encouragement for all those who enter the hospice house. "We are very grateful to our contractor, Stevens Construction, and especially Site Manager Mike Garland for allowing us the time for this experience," said Chaplain Langham. "The workers are on a tight schedule, and we appreciate their willingness to let us come into the building."

Everyone grabbed a permanent marker, staked out a section of wall and got to work. Most of the participants gave the project some forethought and came prepared to write, referring to notes on scraps of paper or bookmarked Bible passages. Some limited their writings to a single room, while others made it a point to leave messages in all 16 private rooms and the chapel.

Elaine Short, a Good Shepherd Hospice volunteer for nearly 10 years, was privileged to take part. "I felt as if I could put my feelings behind those walls," she said. "I was able to leave something for posterity. It's there, even though patients can't see it."

When finished, the Somers Hospice House will be the area's first freestanding, acute-care hospice facility. While most terminally ill patients receive hospice care in their homes, between 40 to 60 percent will need admission to an inpatient care facility sometime during their hospice stay to address pain management or symptom control. At a hospice house, healthcare professionals and trained volunteers can provide that needed care in a serene and compassionate setting, without subjecting patients to unwanted tests or treatments.

Good Shepherd Hospice Volunteer Elaine White also felt deeply honored to write on the hospice house walls. She brought four pages of scripture for inspiration and ended up using most, making certain that none of the patient rooms near the front of the hospice house lacked a passage or prayer of comfort.

White got her encouragement from Matthew 11:28, which states, "I will give you rest." "It's a great comfort to know the Lord's words are in the inner most part of that building ... that the rooms have been silently prayed over," she said.

Good Shepherd Hospice announced in January that the new facility would be named in honor of long-time Sebring residents Bud and Donna Somers, who both received end-of-life care from Good Shepherd Hospice. Mr. Somers made a significant contribution to Good Shepherd Hospice late last year in memory of his wife, who died in 2009. Mr. Somers passed away in early June.

"The Somers Hospice House is a special place for our community. Some even call it sacred," added McIntyre. "I've had so many people ask me about its progress and when it will open. We are grateful that Good Shepherd Hospice will be able to deliver this important level of care and that the people of Highlands County have embraced the belief so completely."

Chaplain Langham reinforced that hospice care provides patients necessary physical care along with added social, emotional and spiritual support during a most vulnerable time. "The hospice house is more than brick and mortar, more than a place for people to die," he explained. "These rooms are where real soul searching takes place, and these hidden words are from the hearts of our staff and volunteers. "

However, one of Elaine Short's messages, concealed in the walls of the Somers Hospice House, may sum it up best:

No matter who you are and no matter where you've been on life's journey, you will find comfort and compassion within these walls.

About Good Shepherd Hospice

Good Shepherd Hospice is a community-based, not-for-profit organization that supports and serves approximately 750 patients each day in Polk, Highlands and Hardee counties 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 programs are 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, please visit the website at www.goodshepherdhospice.org

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Good Shepherd Chaplain Jim Langham offered some words of inspiration before the July 7 wall-signing event at the Bud and Donna Somers Hospice House in Sebring.



Good Shepherd Hospice volunteers leave messages of support and hope on the unfinished walls of the Bud and Donna Somers Hospice House in Sebring. From left: Marge Stella, Elaine Short and Joan Schumaker.