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Highlands County judge helps hospice wish become a reality

SEBRING, FLA. – Judge Peter Estrada, a Highlands County circuit judge, cites his parents as being major influences in his life. In a January, 2006 *Lakeland Ledger* profile, Judge Estrada dedicated “his successes to his parents’ loving childrearing and the virtues that they installed in him.”

Judge Estrada’s childhood was happy, but he also saw his parents work hard to provide for him. His father worked the graveyard shift at a Tampa shipyard and his mother was a seamstress. At the age of 11, Judge Estrada’s world dramatically changed when his father, Fransisco, died suddenly and unexpectedly. He remained extremely close to his mother, Aida, until her death in 2007 at the age of 89 while under the care of a hospice in Tampa.

Sebring attorney Jim McCollum had the opportunity to meet Mrs. Estrada at her son’s investiture where he saw firsthand her effect on her son’s life. “It was obvious that Judge Estrada’s parents made an impact,” recalled McCollum. “Their strong family values and morals helped shape him in many ways.”

In the time that hospice cared for his mother, Judge Estrada witnessed the compassionate care hospice healthcare professionals provide to patients and their families as they face the many challenges of life-limiting illnesses. He also learned about a setting of hospice care that’s currently unavailable in Highlands County – hospice house care. At a hospice house, patients receive pain control, symptom management and medical procedures in a safe, homelike setting.

To remember his mother, Judge Estrada made a unique memorial request – in lieu of flowers, he asked that donations be made to Sebring’s Good Shepherd Hospice and be designated for the construction of the first hospice house in Highlands County.

McCollum, a long-time supporter of Good Shepherd Hospice, believes Judge Estrada’s heartfelt request will be the foundation for a project that’s

gaining momentum. “Judge Estrada is quite forward thinking when he asked that memorials made in his mother’s memory go to building a hospice house here in our community,” he said. “Those funds will be some of the earliest gifts to go toward the new hospice house Good Shepherd Hospice plans to build in Highlands County.”

In late August, the state of Florida announced that it had approved Good Shepherd Hospice’s application to build the first freestanding hospice house in Highlands County.

In most cases, Good Shepherd Hospice healthcare professionals and trained volunteers deliver care wherever a patient lives, whether that is a private residence, nursing home, assisted living facility or hospital. “Between 40 to 60 percent of terminally ill patients will need some sort of inpatient care during their hospice experience,” said Becky McIntyre, Good Shepherd Hospice regional director. “Currently, patients needing hospice house care must travel nearly 50 miles to Auburndale. And most families don’t want their frail loved ones subjected to traveling such a distance or being so far away.”

At a hospice house, patients receive the same high quality care found in a hospital setting without having to undergo unwanted tests or unnecessary procedures. A Good Shepherd Hospice physician oversees care, with a registered nurse and other certified healthcare professionals on duty 24 hours a day. Trained volunteers make visits to provide companionship for patients or a much-needed break for family members. “Care at a hospice house centers on getting pain and symptoms under control in a comfortable setting, with family, friends and even pets nearby,” added McIntyre.

In addition to outstanding end-of-life care, the hospice house will feature private rooms and baths, sofa sleepers for family members’ visits, cable television with DVD players, a spacious common area, screened lanais, a family laundry facility, a play area for visiting children or pediatric patients, a library with an Internet accessible computer, and a spiritual retreat room.

“Good Shepherd Hospice is so grateful that Judge Estrada recognized the special care found at a hospice house and thought to have us as the beneficiary of his mother’s memorials,” said McIntyre. “His positive hospice experience in Tampa will truly help patients here in Highlands County.”

As a community-based, not-for-profit organization, Good Shepherd Hospice relies on donations, like Mrs. Estrada’s memorials, to fund vital programs and services. “I hope Judge Estrada will be an example to others in Highlands County on how they can play a part in making sure that our friends and family have nearby access to quality hospice house care,” said McCollum.

Good Shepherd Hospice is in the process of closing on property for the hospice house. When that is finalized, it will announce the location and expected completion date.

Good Shepherd Hospice embraces its mission to make the most of life by relieving the suffering of patients and their families affected by life-limiting illnesses or end-of-life issues. The organization is a community-based, not-for-profit hospice that has been a part of Polk, Hardee and Highlands counties since 1979. Good Shepherd Hospice received national recognition with a 2008 Circle of Life Citation of Honor and is the only local agency offering hospice programs accredited by the Joint Commission, which sets the national standards for healthcare accreditation. 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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