

Help to the end: Local hospice office helps patients, families cope

By Susan Glairon, Longmont Times-Call | December 25, 2007



LONGMONT — Don Secor made his decision in the doctor's office, when a CT scan showed the cancer had spread, and the talk turned to taking out his only kidney.

"Enough," Secor said.

He didn't want more surgery. He didn't want to go on dialysis. He didn't want to spend his last days in a hospital.

"I said, 'The hell with it,'" said Secor, 80. "I'm going to let life take its course."

That was a little more than one year ago.

Since Sept. 19, Secor has been a client of HospiceCare of Boulder and Broomfield Counties, where a nurse, chaplain and social worker visit with him and his family regularly and help them deal with end-of-life issues.

The nonprofit, which this month opened a Longmont office, served between 1,200 and 1,300 patients this year, along with their families, executive director Darla Scheuth said. HospiceCare has served the community since 1976, including Longmont, but it hadn't had a Longmont office since 2001.

When Secor requests a visit, a nurse comes to his Longmont home to help manage any symptoms or pain issues and confers with his doctor, also part of the team; a chaplain counsels him and his family about spiritual issues; and a social worker helps him and his family deal with stress and other issues. Team members also call the Secor home on a regular basis to check in.

"Don is in front of the boat — he has the oars — and his wife and family (are) behind him, and the hospice team is in the back supporting him wherever he wants to go," said Barbara Torres, a social worker with HospiceCare who works with the Secors.

In December 1990, doctors removed Secor's right kidney to stave off the cancer, and the cancer went into remission. About four years ago, his parotid gland became cancerous, and doctors removed it, too. Then about a year ago, a scan revealed the cancer had moved into his left kidney, both lungs and his thyroid.

Secor also has congenital heart failure and a pacemaker.

Although he refused more surgery, he said he felt good until this summer, when he had spells in which he temporarily went blind and sometimes was unresponsive.

His doctor adjusted his medication — but also recommended that he talk to HospiceCare.

“I didn’t resist it,” said Secor, who once worked as the chief of the office of business development for the state of New Jersey. “I figured I’d been down the road. A lot of things were sending a message something was seriously wrong.”

Secor’s wife, Pat, 78, said it’s been hard for her but that hospice has been a godsend. The two have been married for 58 years, and have four children and four grandchildren.

“If I’m feeling down or overwhelmed, not feeling tip-top, they are here for me, and I can call any time,” she said. “That’s a comforting feeling to know you are not alone.”

During the bouts in which he lost his vision and sometimes was unresponsive, Pat often thought it was the end, she said.

But for now, those symptoms have been managed with changes in medication, and most of the time Don feels well enough to do errands or go out for dinner.

“He’s just been doing so much better since hospice,” Pat said.

Don said he feels cared for by the hospice team and is relieved that his family is cared for, too.

“The best thing for me is that they are just as much concerned about the family, as opposed to just an individual, that they really want to help the family deal with this,” he said.

He attributes his longevity with cancer to “faith and hope and love, and a positive attitude.”

Torres said it’s not unusual for patients to improve once they enter the hospice program. And if he feels well enough and they decide to go on a trip to the Stanley Hotel, hospice can link the couple to another hospice in Estes Park.

Several weeks ago, Don dreamed he wasn’t going to wake up.

“I am not ready,” he said. And he woke up.

“I still have boxes to unpack,” Secor told the chaplain in a recent visit.

The boxes were from his move to Longmont six years ago.

“My philosophy is not to give up on anything,” Don said. “Stick with it, and do your best.

“I turned to Pat one day and told her, ‘I feel like I’m falling in love all over again.’ When you’re 80, that’s not bad.”

Used with Permission from the Longmont Times-Call