Complication, Comfort and Care
When it’s Needed Most

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Introducing Ruth Fishbeck,
Executive Director

On November 2nd, Ruth Fishbeck assumed the role of Executive Director for Hospice. Originally from the Saratoga area, she has lived in the north country for 25 years. Her professional career has been focused in the non-profit sector, most recently at the St. Lawrence Health Initiative. She has been involved in community partnerships throughout her career to strengthen services provided to area residents. Additionally, she has served on committees at the local and state levels and is proficient in DSRIP, the Medicaid redesign program New York state has proposed. Her track record for successful grant writing, program development, strategic planning and evaluation will be an asset to Hospice as it navigates regulatory changes within the healthcare system.

While she is new to Hospice, she has been familiar with issues experienced at the end of life. The daughter of a methodist minister, she recalls her family being very open about death and bereavement through her father’s work with parishioners. “Although it wasn’t formal hospice care at that point, it followed along with the hospice movement which was gaining steam in the United States while I was growing up,” she said. “At that time, informal groups such as churches were the only support system some families had when facing these issues. My father counseled families as they made decisions regarding their care and wishes when faced with illness. He also provided support for the families who were left behind,” she continued. “These are all aspects of hospice care as we know them today. When the position opened, it was a natural fit and I jumped at the opportunity to be a part of this great organization.”

When Ruth addressed Board Members, staff and volunteers in a presentation during the hiring process, she began by saying “I don’t want to work at Hospice, I want to work for Hospice. This is a vital community service and I look forward to the opportunity to put the skills I have developed through-out my career to use to ensure the residents of St. Lawrence County continue to have access to high quality care at the end of life,” she finished.

Welcome Ruth!

A Caregiver’s Journey

By Samantha Jones
Development and Community Relations Assistant

For more than two decades, Kay Church has been answering the call of hospice care and has been putting the needs of others above her own. In that time, she has served as the primary caregiver for multiple family members and has been involved first-hand with many of Hospice’s services.

As with many cases, Kay’s involvement with Hospice came with the illness of a loved one. She first experienced hospice while caring for her mother after she became seriously ill. Kay said her experience with hospice was a blessing in disguise. “When I was taking care of my mom, I learned so many things about her that I hadn’t known. Through caregiving I became closer to my mother during her last few months than I had been my entire life.” In addition to her mother receiving Hospice services, Kay also experienced hospice care for her son in South Carolina.

After witnessing the special kind of comfort care Hospice provides, Kay was inspired to carry out the mission herself. She originally trained to become a volunteer with Hospice of Jefferson County and has been volunteering with Hospice of St. Lawrence Valley for the past 15 years. When asked what drives her to this work she replied “For me it’s a joy to be there helping someone in the last part of their life. I have learned so much through Hospice. They teach you how to live and they teach you how to die.”

But Kay’s story doesn’t end there. As fate would have it, her services as a caregiver were needed once again when her husband, Bob, was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. When the Alzheimer’s began to take hold, Kay became proactive in her care for Bob. She spent countless hours reading and researching about the disease; its progression and symptoms, resources for Bob, and tools to aide in her care of him. She did so entirely out of devotion. “I wanted to be the best caregiver I could be for Bob,” says Kay. “I wanted to know that I was doing everything I could for him.”

More than five million people in the U.S. have been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease and the number is expected to rise as the country’s population ages. The disease is incurable, progressive, and destroys regions of the brain associated with cognition and memory. After it destroys a person’s essence—their identity—the disease can take a person’s life. Alzheimer’s disease is officially listed as the sixth-leading cause of death in the United States.

For a time, Bob was able to mask his symptoms from the rest of the world. But eventually signs of his cognitive impairment began to emerge. As those symptoms became worse, Kay said she worried that people would not understand, or worse, fear Bob because of his disease. Kay discovered a tool she could use to help others understand her husband’s unusual situation. A small card she passes out that simply reads:

My husband has Alzheimer’s. Please be patient with him. Thank you for understanding.

Kay has had to deal with the stigma that accompanies this disease, the intimacies that arise when one tends to a spouse who grows increasingly dependent, and the terror that erupts when patients lash out in fear and confusion at those closest to them. Yet, despite all of their struggles, she has remained at Bob’s side, caring for him night and day. Why does she do it? Why does she stick around? Why would anyone want to live that way? These are questions Kay has had to face more times than she would like to recall. Her answer is simple. You can see it in her capacity to love and care for Bob regardless of the hardships associated with his disease.

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Brothers Stanley and Maynard Planty have shared many similar life experiences, including serving in the United States Army at the same time. Stanley shared stories with Hospice staff and life experiences, including serving in the United States Army at the same time. Stanley was stationed in Turkey as a wheeled vehicle mechanic and Maynard in Korea as a track vehicle mechanic. Both brothers returned to the United States to work for a short time at the same auto dealership. Stanley continued in the auto industry as a teacher at the first St. Lawrence BOCES School.

In 2015, Hospice staff and volunteers performed more than 60 pinning ceremonies for veteran patients.

Thank you for your service.

Retiring in 2015 are Director of Finance Mac Shoen (left) and Social Work Assistant Fay Peters (right), seen in the picture above. The pair was always willing to assist staff and patients by delivering motorized chairs, lift chairs and large equipment when needed. Fay has worked for forty years in the Social Work field, the last 12 at Hospice. Mac has been the Director of Finance and Human Resources with Hospice for 16 years. The two are very well known for their contributions to the annual Staff Development Day where their sense of humor was on full display. Always willing to go the extra mile for a co-worker, patient or anyone who needed help, they will be missed.

Best wishes from all of us at Hospice. You deserve the very best retirement has to offer.

But care giving takes its toll. The stress and risk of burnout connected to this role can leave a person with feelings of despair and frustration. Fortunately, support was available when Kay needed it. “Through volunteering I received the Hospice Newsletter each year,” recalls Kay. “I read about the Caregiver Education and Support programs and began attending one of the support groups.” For Kay (and many other caregivers), the support group has been an invaluable tool. The group members can use it as a place to share their stories. They discuss how they are dealing with caregiving or share ideas and tools that have been helpful. It’s a place to go to have a good laugh when they need a pick-me-up and other times it’s a place where they can share a few tears after a stressful week.

“It doesn’t matter what your loved one’s diagnosis is, the group welcomes everyone who needs support,” says Kay. “The group supports each other. It’s a wonderful feeling to know you are not alone and to be with people who truly understand what you are going through. The group meetings have really reinforced that. It’s comforting to know there are others dealing with the same things I am and that it is okay.”

Last year, 15.5 million people were providing care for a person with Alzheimer’s and other dementias and provided an estimated 17.9 billion hours of informal (that is, unpaid) assistance; a contribution to the nation valued at $217.7 billion.

Kay’s advice to fellow caregivers: “Support groups are so important; go to them. If you are caring for a loved one you are not alone. Hospice is here.”

Since beginning in early 2015, the Caregiver Support Groups continue to meet on the second Thursday of the month. This is a free service offered to the community. Anyone is welcome; a Hospice affiliation is not required. For more information on the Caregiver Support Program, contact Nancy Vosbrink at 265-3105.

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One Final Ride

Elmer Denesha (left) served in the United States Navy on a supply ship during World War II, from June of 1944 to May of 1946. His ship, the USA Wrangell, was the first ship to the Pacific Theatre to re-arm a fighting ship while both continued to be underway. Although he was very humble about his service, Mr. Denesha was awarded many medals while in the Navy. He also witnessed the raising of the flag at the Island of Iwo Jima. Once he returned from service, Mr. Denesha went to work as a Funeral Director where he was well-respected for his people skills. Being very service oriented, he held many public offices in the town of DeKalb. Mr. Denesha’s pinning ceremony took place in 2014.

“Helping to present a truly amazing tournament in support of our wounded warriors and their fellow athletes last year was an incredible experience for our staff, volunteers and community,” said Kellie Hitchman of Hospice. “We look forward to being part of this incredible event once again. You won’t regret attending a game or two; it is a wonderful experience,” she continued.

Hospice is proudly partnering with the Society of American Military Engineers (SAME), VFW Post 1231, Knights of Columbus, MAC Sports Ltd, SUNY Canton and Donaldson Funeral Home as presenting sponsors of the 2016 tournament.

Wounded Warriors Sled Hockey Tournament

Mark your calendar! The 4th Annual Wounded Warriors Sled Hockey Tournament will take place on March 4th, 5th and 6th, 2016. The home team, the Fort Drum Mountain Warriors, will take on sled hockey teams from Syracuse, Buffalo, Ottawa and other areas at the SUNY Canton Roos House.

Canton native and Fort Drum coach Mark McKenna founded the team five years ago to give wounded soldiers the opportunity to be a part of a team. Last year, the tournament raised nearly $9,000 to support the team as they continue to compete throughout the United States and Canada.

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We hope you’ll join us!
When Grief Comes to School

Each fall, schools in St. Lawrence County are invited to a training in the “When Grief Comes to School” series provided by the staff at Hospice and Palliative Care of St. Lawrence Valley. This year, thanks to a grant provided by the Youth Philanthropy Council at Ogdensburg Free Academy, a Stewart’s Holiday Match and a generous gift in loving memory of Christian House, school personnel who attended the training left with more than just information.

“Our response to tragedies in schools has become very hands on,” said Mary Jones, Director of Family Support Services for Hospice. “We have found the use of activities to assist in the grieving process has been very beneficial for students. Over the course of several years we have developed many coping tools for students to work through while we provide initial counseling and support. Often times we have no warning when a school will need our help, so pulling the supplies for the activities together was always done last minute” she continued. “We quickly realized the value of having the supplies gathered ahead of time and began calling them a Grief Toolbox. For some time we have wanted to put a toolbox in every school district; when the funding came together to provide them at the training this year, we were ecstatic,” she finished.

The Northern New York Community Foundation has worked to create a culture of leadership, citizenship and giving back for young people through the Youth Philanthropy Council. “This funding source has supported other Hospice programming in the past, and, after providing support to many students in the OFA School District, it was a natural fit to ask them to support this initiative,” said Kellie Hitchman, Director of Development and Community Relations. “We had also talked extensively with a donor who wanted to do something significant to honor the memory of Christian House; helping to ensure students have the proper coping skills to work through the loss of a classmate was very appealing to them,” she continued.

Each toolbox consists of 35 items with a very specific purpose. Students can create healing stones by choosing a word that offers them support or empowers them to process their grief. Just as grief is unique to each person who experiences it, the stones have a unique meaning and impact to each person who holds them. Also included in the toolbox are the supplies for the students to create a memory wall and thumbprint mural which is displayed to bring even stronger programming and support to the family. They can see how special their loved one was to the school community,” said Mary Jones.

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Congratulations Brian

On October 30th, Brian Gardam exited the Hospice Center for the last time as Executive Director, leaving behind twenty years of exceptional leadership. When he began at Hospice the number of patients served each day was approximately 30. The landscape of Hospice and the healthcare field would change dramatically throughout his career.

During his tenure, Brian worked tirelessly to advance end of life care for the residents of St. Lawrence County. Hospice expanded to serve areas in the southern part of the county, agreements were reached to provide care to residents of local nursing homes and the Comfort Care Program was introduced for patients located in area hospitals. In addition to expanded patient care, the Community Bereavement Program was introduced. As the number of patients continued to grow, so did the need for additional staff and a place to coordinate the care provided each day. In 2006, staff moved into the Hospice Center on Route 11 in Potsdam.

One of the most significant advancements came in 2012 when a Palliative Care program was developed to work with patients experiencing a chronic illness, but who were not yet appropriate for Hospice. In 2014, renovations at a property adjacent to the Hospice Center were completed and a Nurse Practitioner joined the Palliative Care staff to provide patient consultations in homes, hospitals and at the newly created Palliative Care Center. In October of 2015, the Palliative Care team made 86 visits to patients and their families.

On October 30th, 2015, when Brian exited the Hospice Center for the last time as Executive Director, the number of patients served was 90. Under his leadership, the number of patients and families served each day tripled, existing programs were drastically improved and new programs are now thriving. Thank you Brian, for all you have done for Hospice, the patients and families it serves and the community. Your work has left a lasting impact on many people when they need it most.

The Brian Gardam Tranquility Trail

When discussing a fitting tribute to Brian’s dedicated service, staff suggested naming the Tranquility Trail in his honor. Brian worked with two Eagle Scout candidates in developing the trail behind the Hospice Center which is a quarter mile long and is an extension of the Hospice Memorial Garden. He approached the creation and maintenance of the trail as he often did his work; thoughtfully and carefully planning each aspect, gathering the appropriate resources, establishing important partnerships and jumping in to work hands on when needed. Brian often walked the trail and even cross country skied it in the winter. He greatly enjoyed the peace and reflection it offered. We hope it offers the same for staff, volunteers and visitors as they walk the Brian Gardam Tranquility Trail. He is pictured on the cover displaying the plaque to be placed at the trail head. The plaque reads:

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Nominated in grateful recognition of 20 years of dedicated service to Hospice and Palliative Care of St. Lawrence Valley

Throughout his twenty years with the organization, Brian was instrumental in advancing end of life care for the residents of St. Lawrence County. His steadfast leadership, compassion and devotion have enabled countless patients and their families to find peace in chaos, comfort for their pain and the ability to celebrate life in the place of their choice.

The plaque reads:
Hospice Memorial Garden Reservation Form

I would like to memorialize/honor my loved one, ______________________, in the Garden with a gift to Hospice of St. Lawrence Valley in the amount of $__________. For the following Garden feature(s) (select from list below): ________________________________

Name: ___________________________ Phone: ___________________________
Address: ___________________________

Payment Method (Please circle one:)
Check (payable to Hospice of St. Lawrence Valley) Mastercard Visa Discover
Name on Credit Card __________________________ Exp. Date __________________________
Card Number __________________________
Signature __________________________

4” x 8” Memorial Paver, $125
12” x 12” Memorial Paver $500
Memorial Grove Tree, $1,500
24” x 24” Corporate Paver, $2,000
To Name the Hospice Memorial Garden in its Entirety, $50,000

When ordering a paver, please print desired engraving below:
4”x8” Pavers: 3 lines, up to 14 characters per line (inc. spaces).
12”x12” Paver: 6 lines, up to 15 characters per line (inc. spaces)

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Please cut out and return form to: Hospice of St. Lawrence Valley, 6805 US Hwy 11, Potsdam, NY 13676

4" x 8" Memorial Paver, $125  12" x 12" Memorial Paver $500  Memorial Grove Tree, $1,500  24" x 24" Corporate Paver, $2,000  To Name the Hospice Memorial Garden in its Entirety, $50,000