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Time to share brings families to Ithaca's hospice

Holiday gathering puts emphasis on 'how you live'

By Stacey Shackford
sshackford@gannett.com

ITHACA -- Time together at the holidays takes on greater meaning when it is the last one with a family member.

But when someone is dying, dinner logistics can seem overwhelming, so volunteers at Hospicare & Palliative Care of Tompkins County step in to prepare holiday feasts for patients and their families.

Trumansburg mother Donna Fein turned up at the Nina K. Miller Hospicare Center on Ithaca's South Hill at 11 a.m. Christmas morning with her daughter, Robin, and an apple pie the two had baked together. By 2 p.m., she had a huge expanse of tables dressed and set for 25, and her husband, Rich, and son, Will, joined them to help serve platters of ham, green beans and mashed potatoes to three residents and their families.

Fein, a volunteer for five years, has spent three Christmases at the center. Sometimes, she knows the families who join her at the table; sometimes, she meets them for the first time during the meal.

On Friday, she got to meet the Musci family, who gathered early to play board games and stayed late to admire the view from the great expanse of floor-to-ceiling windows at the East King Road facility.



At the head of the table was Mike Musci, a former Cornell University police officer from Cortland. He was surrounded by his wife, Shelly, his children, Alex and Katie, and his parents, Jack and Nancy.

Nancy said she was thankful for the meal because it allowed the family to simply relax and spend the holiday together.

Mike characterized his entire stay at the hospice, where he has been since October, as "outstanding."

(STACEY SHACKFORD / Staff Photo)

Joking that he gets to stay in the presidential suite, he credited the staff for being wonderfully supportive and the entire system for allowing him and his wife to move from being care receiver and caregiver to husband and wife again.

"When I was stuck in a back room, my life consisted of CNBC and Spongebob Squarepants, and I was counting on either my wife or my parents to take care of me," he said. "But now even though I'm 40 minutes from home, I'm closer than ever to my family."

"My pain became relieved, so I can think clearer and my relationship with my wife improved even more," he added. "I think every community needs a place like this to provide respite for the caregiver."

For Sue Merrill, the day provided a different type of respite -- an escape from the commercialism of Christmas and an opportunity to spend quality time with others.

Like many of the volunteers at the hospice, she first got involved after the illness of a loved one, and continues to return regularly more than a decade later.

Fein said it can be a bittersweet experience, but she just tries to make the day as comfortable and celebratory as possible.

That's the mission of the agency as well. Following the motto "It's about how you live," the staff strive to provide both medical expertise and emotional support to people at any stage of a life-threatening illness. They also work closely with family members to offer counseling and practical assistance.

The Nina K. Miller Hospicare Center was the state's first stand-alone hospice residence when it opened in 1995, and offers private rooms for up to six residents. In 2008, 62 patients stayed there. But the agency served 260 more through outreach services in nursing homes, hospitals and patient homes.

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