

A Place To Live Until You Die



Staff photo by Robert Mulherin

Jimmie Schmuck died on March 19 in St. Anthony's Hospice and Life Enrichment Center.

Taste of Death Cannot Sour Thoughts of Past

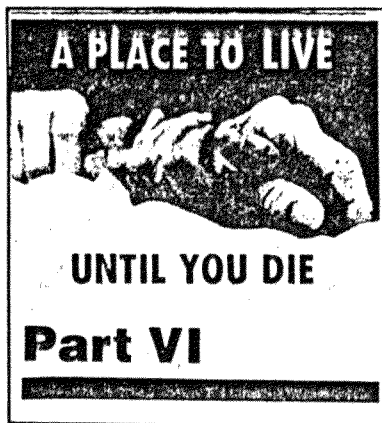
By KIM PHELAN
Globe-News Medical Writer

The taste of death filled Jimmie Schmuck's mouth as she continued to speak of memories that filled her past and the cancer that consumed her future.

A blood clot that surfaced into the 52-year-old woman's mouth earlier that morning left red remnants on her lips, tongue and teeth. The taste was awful, she said. The taste was dry.

Bleeding through the mouth and nose has become one of the many inconveniences that have riddled Jimmie's life since she discovered a lump in her left breast six years ago.

Radiation and chemotherapy treatments coupled with the cancer's spread to her bones have left the Amarillo woman without the



ability to replenish her blood.

"When I first found out that I had cancer, it was just stunning," Jimmie recalled as she reclined in her bed at St. Anthony's Hospice and Life Enrichment Center. "I mean, there are just no words to describe it. It was devastating.

"And, of course, my children were too young to be of any help. So I called the hospice. I remember talking to them for 45 minutes. I remember crying the entire time. I just couldn't stop crying."

Tears filled her eyes as she recalled the June day many years ago — a lifetime ago. She stopped for a second to gain her composure.

Gently she blotted her bloodied nose and sniffed. With one deep breath, her faltering voice suddenly became strong.

"They saved my life," she emphatically declared. "They really did. If it hadn't been for the hospice, I wouldn't be here because I would have committed suicide."

The day that Jimmie called the hospice in 1981 she was telephoning the third floor of St. Anthony's

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Hospital where the hospice basically worked out of a closet, said Carolyn Hurt, St. Anthony's Hospice and Life Enrichment office manager.

The hospice wouldn't open the doors of its new building until March 8, 1985, nearly five years after the first patient was enrolled in the program.

St. Anthony's infant years of hospice work mostly were spent administering to dying patients scattered in different areas of the hospital or caring for dying patients on an out-patient basis.

And Jimmie, whether or not she would submit to the inevitable, was one of those dying patients.

After having a radical mastectomy of her left breast, Jimmie underwent a battery of radiation and chemotherapy treatments. She called the chemotherapy room the Atom Bomb room because in her own mind while undergoing treatment she would bomb the room with paint. By the end of a treatment, she would have mentally thrown seven gallons of paint around the room.

"Seven whole gallons. You have no idea how good that felt," she said with a smile as she remembered the mental vengeance she took out on the room. "Those treatments burned my skin like a really bad sunburn with little lesions all over. I hated it."

For three years after the mastectomy, the mother of seven children would feel healthy again. The cancer, in her mind, was gone. The cancer, in the doctor's minds, still could be lingering in ambush.

"I knew I got rid of the cancer," Jimmie said, spitting out the word as if it were death itself. "The doctors didn't, but I knew I did. I just knew I was going to be the one who survived it. That was just one more denial."

Then it struck again. In 1984 back pain brought Jimmie to the hospital again. Tests told doctors that the cancer had infiltrated her bone. The prognosis was not good.

"And I still denied it for two more years," she said. "Some people are just stubborn. Some people won't accept it. But it comes to the point when you have to accept it."

"I finally decided I was angry. Angry at my cancer. Angry at my children who I was taking it out on, and angry at myself - although I didn't know why I was mad at me."

Her voice pitched high with the last sentence as she adjusted the pillows against her back. Unconsciously, she smoothed her blue hospital gown and straightened her covers. Again she dabbed at her bloodied nose with her hand then inspected the blood on her fingers.

"I thought, 'This just can't keep on.' You get it settled in one place

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- Jimmie Schmuck

and it shows up in another place."

By the time Jimmie was enrolled as an inpatient in the hospice program on March 10, 1986, the cancer had spread to her lungs, liver, skin and brain. Three radiation treatments last December left her with only a small fringe of fuzzy hair at the base of her head. As her hair disappeared, so did her long list of denials.

"Up until December it wasn't really a reality," she said as she self-consciously adjusted her pink polka dot bandana hiding her head of skin. "But I've never seen a case that it (cancer in the brain) didn't kill. But I looked at it in December and decided that it doesn't matter what you want anymore. It's just what is feasible."

"So I decided that the cancer was going to run its course no matter what I did. I may have to give into it. I may have to make concessions. But I'm going to stand on top of it."

One of the many concession Jimmie made in the past months concerns her health. She realizes that she might never regain the strength that would allow her to be self-sufficient again. Now she is barely able to push with both her hands a bedside button to call a nurse to her room. She is short of breath. Her hands constantly shake. But her will lives on.

"If I never make it to what I was before what's wrong with that?" she asked as if talking to herself. "As long as I feel as good as I feel now, what's wrong with that! I think if you just try, you can do anything. How long you do it is another thing."

"And that's why I say you have to have a good relationship with the physician," she abruptly stated, turning toward a medical student who had been sitting off to the side of her bed for a half hour.

The sudden attention thrown his way caused him to sit up in his chair. He knew what was coming next. The nurses had pre-warned him about Jimmie's anger toward doctors.

"The physician is the one who is going to give you the strength when you have none left," Jimmie continued in a lecturing voice. "That's why he has got to be sincere. When you have cancer, it doesn't take you long to find out if they're hollow or

not.

"The other thing I've found in my disease is touching. Touching is very important. If you don't learn anything else, you must learn to touch. If not, you will never earn that patient's trust."

"I think a lot of patients give up because the patient and physician never establish a caring, touching relationship. If that's not established, the patient might as well die right there and then."

Having said her piece, Jimmie finally fell silent. Many physicians had filled her life. She viewed most of them, as she did most of the people in her life, as adequate but containing some inadequacies. The exception to her list of doctors was an oncologist whose treatment she left.

"We had what I like to call a misunderstanding of the minds and tongues," she explained with a chuckle.

Such misunderstandings were common occurrences to Jimmie. Her relationships with her seven daughters and nine grandchildren were peppered with misunderstandings, many of which were untangled by the hospice counseling team, she said.

Jimmie remembered the family counseling sessions she spent wading through hostile, angry feelings.

"Let me tell you, it was like a pack of werewolves in the room," she said as she described the sessions. "I wanted to get up and hit my daughter right across the face. And I'll tell you what - she wanted to hit me! But Genneil (Ray, a former hospice counseling coordinator,) kept it loose. And when we left there we were able to work it out."

"That's one thing that a cancer patient needs. Empathy but with to-

tal, total honesty. No matter how much it hurts. No matter if it hurt your daughters or what. If it becomes a taboo subject then every one is hurt.

"I feel safe enough here," she said as she looked around her room.

A couch and a recliner gave the room a homey atmosphere. In front of the door leading to a courtyard stood her walker. She once had used it to get to and from the shower or toilet. Now she was only strong enough to sit up in a chair and look at its metal frame.

Hanging from the ceiling was television. She didn't mind that she was too weak to push the bedside button to turn on the set. She didn't really care for television program - especially the soap operas.

Instead, the ailing woman preferred to spend her days watching out the picture window in her room or reading a stack of classics. Although she admitted to needing people, she preferred to be left alone. She had become selfish with the precious time left to her, she said.

"I'm going to go sometime," she said matter of factly. "I'm certainly not going to lay here and wonder if this is my day to die. In a way, I'm anticipating it. I won't be suffering like this."

"What makes me sad is that there are so many people who are deathly scared about dying, and can't help them. The first thing that people who are terminally ill need to realize is that they need not fear death, that there is a life after death."

"If I had to just go I'd like to go kind of like I am - no weaker than am now - then just go to sleep. But I want to wake up just in time to realize that I was going. Then I'll close my eyes and be gone."

On March 19 at 6 p.m., Jimmie Schmuck did just that.

During the last few days the pulsing through her body had escalated past the help of morphine. After lying in a coma for several days, Jimmie opened her eyes to talk on the telephone to two old friends from New Mexico where she had lived before moving to Amarillo.

Then slowly, she closed her eyes one last time.