

Hospice brought us home



by Allison Lindgren

"They come into our lives as a last, new best friend and we entrust our final days to them. They have the wisdom of a sage and the heart of an angel—they are the nurses, social workers, chaplains and nursing aides who provide hospice care. Hospice caregivers possess so much more beyond their credentials; they have a unique calling, a vocation to fill patients and families lives with joy, dignity and meaning that come from boundless empathy, compassion and clinical excellence."

These words, the start of a letter written by a Hospice family member, are a lesson that Larry and Jeanne Wobbema learned in 2014. Jeanne and Larry had been on vacation in Michigan in June 2014. Larry had been uncomfortable with a backache on the way to Michigan but on the return trip, he was miserable. On their return, Jeanne scheduled a clinic appointment in Carrington and eight days later, Larry was diagnosed with stage four liver cancer. Jeanne said, "Prior to the vacation, we had no warning or indication that anything was wrong. It happened so fast, it was unbelievable."

After receiving the diagnosis, Larry told Dr. Page

that he didn't want to do anything to fight the cancer. Though the doctor said he would respect his wishes, he also told them he would like to see Larry go to the Roger Maris Cancer Center so that they could make an informed decision.

They made the appointment, but the prognosis at Roger Maris was bleak. "I remember meeting with Dr. Shahidi, an oncologist; he explained different things that we could try but he didn't believe any of them would do any good. He gave us no false hope," Jeanne recalled. "You have to give medical professionals a lot of credit; he was very honest with us but it seemed to break his heart. His head seemed to bow a little more with each bit of information that he gave us. It was obvious that he didn't want to be telling us what he was telling us."

Walking out of that office was very difficult, like walking a straight path to nowhere—just putting one foot in front of the other. Larry said again that he would be doing nothing to fight the cancer. Jeanne assured him that she would support whatever decision that he made and she would be there for everything that was to come. They made another appointment to meet

with Dr. Page, who told them that they would need to contact Hospice. Jeanne panicked when she heard the word "hospice" because she had mistakenly believed that hospice was only for the final two weeks. "I just kept repeating, Not yet, NOT YET," Jeanne noted. Dr. Page turned his attention to her at that point, telling her that she was going to want a relationship with Hospice, and that they would end up being her strength. Jeanne was still resistant, but he encouraged them to at least have an initial conversation with them so they could explain what would happen.

Stacey Cleveland, a Hospice RN with CHI Health at Home (Mercy Hospice), came to the house a few days later. Jeanne said, "She was our Hospice nurse, and I was not very receptive when she walked in the door. I told her that I didn't understand why we were doing this already. She was so good and so kind." Stacey talked to both Larry and Jeanne, got his information and took his vitals. Then she told them that she wanted to bring some things to the house for "when they were needed". Jeanne told her that when it got closer, she should do that. Stacey told her that they didn't have to use it but that she needed to bring it to the house now for "when it is needed". She came with a package of items that Jeanne said she couldn't put it far enough away because she didn't even want to look at it. However, it was only a matter of days before they were starting to use the items that were in the package.

Jeanne's relationship with Hospice quickly became very valuable. Stacey came in once a week at first and then it got to be every couple of days. Soon, there were many telephone conversations. Nothing in the process came as a surprise to them because they had been told what to expect, and it made dealing with it so much easier.

"Everyone who was involved in the process with us, including myself, was amazed at what a wonderful journey those 45 days gave us. There were lots of good times, some funny hours

when we talked about everything. We talked about the funeral, we talked about what was going to happen with the kids, we talked about what I would do. We were able to share good times in the privacy of our own home," Jeanne recalled.

The last weekend before Larry died, someone called Stacey. Jeanne still isn't sure who called her but all of a sudden, Stacey was there. She found Jeanne off in another room, crying. In an act that was not like him, Larry had batted her hand away when she had reached over to do something for him. She told Stacey that it hurt so bad because he wasn't himself. It was getting harder; it seemed like she couldn't do anything to help him. Jeanne asked how long this could go on, and Stacey told her that it wouldn't be much longer.

"When Larry passed away, it was absolutely the most beautiful thing that I have ever experienced in my life. His daughter, Victoria and five very close friends were with us then and it was wonderful that he was allowed to die with dignity. The pastor was there and we had just prayed the Lord's Prayer. At that moment, Larry took one breath and his big, blue eyes opened wide. All I can remember is jumping up on the bed and holding his face, telling him not to turn around—we'll be okay—just keep going. And then he was gone," Jeanne said.

Larry died at home within 45 days of his diagnosis on Sunday, August 24, 2014. Jeanne commented, "It's been a year and a half and Cindy Willey, the CHI Health at Home Social Worker, still occasionally calls me to see how I am doing. I have to give them the credit. Dr. Page, the Hospice Team and, most especially, Stacey Cleveland. She is an awesome young woman and her help was phenomenal. Hospice allowed us to have the privacy of our home. As much as I didn't want them there, I am so thankful for them. So thankful they were there and so thankful for Stacey. Dr. Page brought us Hospice, and Hospice brought us home."