

A Sacred End-of-Life Journey

by

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I don't think it was by accident that I was reacquainted with Talbot Hospice a year before my father died. I had written for the organization first in 2007, creating their website, but then in June 2015, the phone call came asking me to help tell the organization's story as it prepared to open its newly renovated facility on Cynwood Avenue. I was thrilled to be involved again and looked forward to learning how hospice had changed since my first encounter eight years earlier. Things in my life had changed, however, and the journey I was about to be-

gin became a very personal one that would change my life in immeasurable ways.

One of the first stories I was asked to write was about Talbot Hospice's doula program. I had been familiar with the term from when I had given birth to my two sons. I had heard of women I knew using birth doulas to help with their deliveries, transitioning the lives of their babies into a new world. Unsure what a doula did during the active dying process intrigued me. I interviewed hospice doulas and patient families, learning that doulas are trained members



Bob Blades with his wife, Constance, and daughter, Amelia.



The Daddy-Daughter Dance

of the hospice team who help with the moment of death ~ from holding patients' hands, to advocating for them, to helping family members understand the physical changes associated with dying. There are currently 20 active, specially trained doulas with Talbot Hospice. Doulas care for patients in their homes, in nursing facilities, as well as at Hospice House, serving three- to six-hour shifts. I heard from a doula that helping someone pass from one realm to another is a sacred time and a privilege.

End-of-life doulas are specially trained volunteers whose role is to journey with dying patients, serving as a liaison with their loved ones and providing companionship and emotional support. Most im-

portantly, doulas possess a nurturing character and serve as a calm, comforting and secure presence. Doulas can also assist patients in finding meaning in their lives, help create legacy projects with patients and help them plan for how the last days will unfold.

I am not sure I appreciated what that really meant until on June 15, 2016, my family got a call from our Talbot Hospice social worker, Lisa May, asking if we needed a doula as my father, Robert E. Blades, had begun his own journey of dying. I wouldn't be telling the truth if I said it was an easy process to go through. Frankly, we were overwhelmed with how quickly things were progressing. We had just engaged hospice that week and were learning about what services we could use. We were exhausted from sleep deprivation and needed to ask for more help. While hospice nurses were managing his discomfort and taking care of his physical needs, we needed to prepare for his spiritual passing, and we weren't nearly ready for that. Although conversations had been completed about the Five Wishes and the will and final arrangements had been made, we were not ready to lose our dad.

I said yes to the doula that day when the phone call came in, and within minutes Phyllis Peddicord was at our back door. I had spoken to Phyllis months earlier while writing the story about doulas, but



had never met her. Her diminutive size didn't match her mighty spirit. When she walked into my father's room that day, the franticness of the scene diminished and the room immediately became peaceful. Her spirit filled the room, and I could see my dad begin to relax as Phyllis stroked his head and spoke softly to him. I was in awe. This is what patient families had told me about the doula process. I began to understand the sacredness of this time.

Phyllis reassured me that I could manage what was happening and showed me how to reassure my father that we were with him as he was about to leave this realm for the next. The words came naturally to me, although looking back, I don't know where they came from. My dad had confidence where he was going. It reassured me to see his eyes glimmer with hope as he looked beyond us in the room that day to a place that only he could see. My mom, who had been his caregiver for the past few years, was finally able to sit next to him as his wife, as she lovingly said her "good-byes." His passing was calm, it was beautiful, it was sacred.

While I felt a surge of sadness as he left us that day, I felt the power of life and death in new ways. I no longer feared death. I knew that death could be a dignified process and one that I could participate in with a loved one. With the help of Talbot Hospice, my mother and I could face the difficult moment of the death of my dad, knowing we had given him what he wanted. His wishes had been to die in the comfort of his home, surrounded by those who loved him.

Talbot Hospice is an incredible asset to our community. While each individual's experience with the dying process is a personal one, I learned what a blessing it is to have hospice along for the journey. The hospice staff meet you where you are in the process and make the unknowns less scary. In the end, they help families find the joy and celebrate the lives that were lived.

We later learned from some of the hospice workers that at the hour my dad left us on June 15, 2016, a bird had flown to the window of the new Hospice House and demanded their attention while they were in a meeting. He pecked on the window and insisted they take notice of his wings. The staff in the meeting immediately thought of my dad, as they knew he loved watching the birds from his windows on the creek. There is not a doubt in our minds who that bird was at Hospice House that day. My dad had gotten



his wings and had taken flight. Every now and then, a bird will stop by for a visit to my window or my mother's window, giving us great comfort in these days following my dad's death.