

sharing her spirit

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Ask Maria McLain Cox about her job and it becomes clear immediately that she loves what she does. Each morning, she looks forward to a new day of doing what she has done for the past seven years – laughing, crying and providing support for families during a difficult time.

Maria is a chaplain with Hospice of Larimer County. And while some might see her job as one of working with the dying, she sees it another way.

“I guess people might imagine that in hospice it is all really about dying and death, planning funerals,” she told Journey. “But I think if people went with us on our visits, people would see it is about life and all the things life contains.”

Maria exudes warmth and compassion and her calming presence draws people to her. While this job calling came to Maria later in her life, it almost appears she had been preparing for it since college. She received a bachelor's degree in theology and theater and worked in campus ministries at the University of Missouri-Rolla before pursuing a master's degree in pastoral studies from Loyola University. She stayed on at Loyola with campus ministries before attending the Chicago School of Massage.

She and her husband then moved to Colorado, where she opened up her massage therapy practice. The flexible schedule allowed her to spend more time with her family. She enjoyed combining all aspects of her schooling to help and heal people.

After 17 years as massage therapist, Maria developed several repetitive motion injuries that wouldn't heal. Her doctor told her she would not be able to continue as a massage therapist.

The news devastated Maria. She loved her massage practice and couldn't imagine life without it. *The doctor suggested that she think with curiosity, not fear, about her future.*

Holding tight to her faith, she prayed God would show her what she was supposed to do next. Hospice chaplain kept coming to the forefront, she said. Coincidentally, a chaplain position opened up at Hospice of Larimer County and she took a leap of faith.

“I applied and was accepted,” she said.

“After that I closed my massage practice.”

She did not know what was in store for her, but she trusted that God was leading the way and that it would all work out.

That was seven years ago and now Maria is one of the four chaplains at Hospice of Larimer County who provide spiritual care to all hospice patients who desire it.

A chaplain is trained in theology and counseling. Maria has many discussions with patients about belief systems, theological clarification, regrets and fears. She also provides spiritual grief counseling to families, assists with final arrangements and presides at many funeral services.

She said when people think about engaging hospice care for their loved ones or themselves, they think it means “I am dying.”

“They meet us (the chaplains),” she said, “and they see what we look like – how we behave and we present to them, ‘How would you like to live?’ We are there to help them meet life goals and help go on this mysterious journey.”

Maria sets up visits to meet with the patients and their families. The number of visits varies depending on what they want, ranging anywhere from once a month to once a week or even once a day.

For Maria, religion and spirituality are different. Everyone is a spiritual being, she said, and the way that spirituality is expressed is unique for each person. Religion creates the forms and structures around that spirituality.

Because of her theological background, Maria is knowledgeable about many different belief systems. In a non-judgmental way, she will discuss with patients and families their theological beliefs, join in or facilitate various religious practices or connect them with a religious leader if this is something the patient wants.

Maria said hospice chaplains do not preach, teach or represent a certain denomination. Instead, chaplains find out what the patient believes and provides the support and encouragement he or she needs.

Families are made up of people of all ages, personalities and experiences. Each person has a different role in the family and a different relationship with the person dying. Maria is able to meet with the various individuals in the families.

“I am not in that family,” she said. “I don't have any prejudices. I don't have any preconceived ideas. I am just there to bring that loving presence.”

Maria said she feels privileged to share personal and intimate moments with families.

“I cry all the time and I laugh all the time. I get to hear the funny, joyful, silly goofy stories of families as they reminisce over their lifetimes,” she said. “Here I am, a stranger, and I have been invited into this sacred part of their journey and I get to be there with them as they do their life review. It is the time in life, as death is approaching, to turn around and look back. What did I do? Who did it with me? How did it turn out?”

ARTICLE, PHOTO & STORY SUGGESTED BY KERRIE FLANAGAN ✦ JOURNEY CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Maria loves hearing the stories, she said, and has been amazed by the historical significance of those told by people now in their 80s. These are the people who fought in World War II. Some were early pioneers of this area, the people who have streets, parks and schools named after them.

One of Maria's greatest rewards is watching families or friends come together to commit to caring for someone as they die. This is not a common experience for most – to take care of someone whose body is failing and offer support, care and medicine until they take their last breath.

“People will tell me afterwards that they didn't know how they were going to be able to do that, but that was one of the most beautiful experiences in their life,” she said. “They feel so proud that they were able to support someone through that process.”

She shared what someone told her recently at a funeral: “You know, my dad was there when I took my first breath, what an honor for me to be holding his hand as he took his last breath.”

For Maria, this is the greatest gift that hospice gives families.

“They wouldn't know how to do that if we didn't go in,” she said.

Hospice has five beds at McKee Medical Center for the acute cases where 24-hour care is needed, but not all Hospice patients are bedridden. Many are still mobile, some are in nursing homes and assisted living facilities and some live at home.

For Maria and other hospice chaplains, loss in their own lives can be especially challenging.

“Sometimes our own grief is tiring, exhausting and difficult and painful,” she said. “It is very challenging to come to work and care for people who are going through the same thing we are.”

Her own family is coping with a lot of death right now. It is on her mind a lot and she is experiencing first-hand grief and anticipatory grief. When she takes care of herself, Maria said, she is able to care for her patients better. Currently, she is having to be even more conscious of her own self-care

The chaplains cope by supporting each other and being totally aware of their experiences. Maria said hospice provides programs, support and encouragement for the chaplains. Taking care of themselves emotionally, physically and spiritually is vital to their well-being.

For Maria, this means spending time with her husband of 24 years and their three children, being involved in her church community and being outdoors hiking, skating, cross-country skiing or biking. She also loves to sing and is part of a local Sweet Adelines group called “The Blend.”

“Singing with my Sweet Adeline sisters is a great joy for me,” she said.

Maria said she has been blessed by the lessons her patients have taught her. The main one, she said, is “Don't wait.” Don't wait until later to go on that trip, or meet with that person or write that letter. *She said she has a great appreciation for the present moment and realizes just how precious time is.*

There aren't many people who really want to think about the end of their lives. But there is comfort knowing that if hospice care is needed, there are kind and compassionate chaplains like Maria, waiting to take a hand and care for spiritual needs as we finish our life journey. ❖

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