



# Sue Mueller:

## Serving those on their final journey

**K**nowing he had only months to live, Ron Christie longed to make one last road trip along the Highway of Legends in southern Colorado.

Film-makers featuring him in a documentary about Hospice of Michigan offered to rent an RV for Ron and wife Betty, but Ron's worsening cancer had rendered him too weak to travel. The dilemma did not faze Catholic hospice Social Worker Sue Mueller, however. When the film

makers offered to take the trip themselves and capture Ron's favorite route, Mueller helped them put the plan into action. They aired the film in a real movie theater for Ron and his family, complete with popcorn.

"(Sue) was great," said Marcie Hillary, vice president for resource development at Hospice of Michigan. "She helped make a situation that could have turned out poorly into a precious memory for Ron and his family. They hadn't been in a movie theater for 20 years. He was laughing and pointing at the screen the whole time."

Three weeks later, Ron died.

The story exemplifies the ways Sue Mueller helps patients and their families as a hospice social worker. She brings a combination of empathy, faith, humor and practicality to her work. By the time patients enter hospice care, they have exhausted medical treatments. The focus shifts from cure to comfort. Part of a team that includes a nurse, a hospice aid, a physician and a chaplain, Sue provides emotional support and helps patients and their families understand what to expect as they face the end of life.

"When I go to a family's house for the first time, I acknowledge that nobody ever wants hospice walking through the door," said Sue, who cantors at her home parish, St. Pius X in Grandville. "It means that they, or someone they know, is not doing well."

She tries to put people at ease.

"They're so nervous," Sue said. "I try to put levity into it. I always tell them we laugh a lot – there's going to be plenty of time to shed our tears."

Hospice of Michigan does not have a particular religious affiliation. "The beauty of it is that all faiths are recognized and valued," said Sue, who has witnessed the power of faith for those facing death and brings her own sense of spirituality to the work she does.

When she meets a patient, Sue will often ask, "Do you have a faith base?" If they do, I always say, 'We're all here until the good Lord takes us home.' That's very comforting to them."

### A waitress becomes God's messenger

Sue has been married to Tom, an engineer, for 31 years. The two met in the 1970s at the Starboard Tack in Grand Rapids (now Great Lakes Shipping Company) where they both worked at the time. They share their Catholic faith in common, even though they came to Catholicism in different ways – Sue as a cradle Catholic and Tom through conversion later in life. The Muellers have two adult children,



>> Sue (left) collaborates with Belle Kooman, a receptionist at Hospice of Michigan.

Sarah, 30, and Thomas, 27.

After Sue and Tom married, she continued to work in restaurants for 17 years. She was employed in apartment leasing for a time, but knew she wanted something different. Once their children were in school, Sue began to pursue a degree in social work. She earned her master's at Western Michigan University 12 years ago at age 44, and began her new career as a counselor at D.A. Blodgett for Children in Grand Rapids. Sue joined Hospice of Michigan seven years ago.

Going from waitressing to hospice work is not such a leap, Sue said. She can easily follow people's cues and is a self-described "chatty Cathy."

"A lot of our patients say 'You're so full of life.' I think they like that. Who needs it, coming in all doom and gloom? They have enough of that. They don't need that. They have a life well lived."

As a hospice social worker, Sue's role varies based on a patient's needs. She helps with practical matters like power of attorney, finances or funeral arrangements, for example. She helps "normalize" the dying process, candidly explaining what to expect.

On a typical day, Sue logs dozens of miles covering northern Grand Rapids and beyond. Recently, she traveled to a nursing home in Greenville to visit a patient, then headed 10 miles east to Fenwick to visit Ron's wife Betty Christie, who is now in hospice care. Then she drove west to Cedar Springs, before making two more

stops in northwest Grand Rapids. Each day on the way to work or between appointments, Sue prays the rosary.

"It guides me in my day," she said. "It provides me with a lot of comfort because it can be very busy and very chaotic."

She has improvised with the mysteries. She

devotes the first mystery of the rosary to specific needs of loved ones; the second to her children's health and safety; the third to her patients and their families; the fourth to those who have died;

**“A lot of our patients say ‘You’re so full of life.’ I think they like that. Who needs it, coming in all doom and gloom? They already have enough of that.”**



and the fifth to those who need God's help. When she visits patients, "the biggest thing I do is listen," Sue said. If patients are alert, she always invites them to share their thoughts or any fears they may be experiencing.

"Ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, they're not afraid to die. By that time, they're ready. What they're really so sad about is leaving their family and their loved ones," Sue adds.

Sue reassures them that, while family and friends who are left behind will experience sadness and loss, they will be OK. Many patients who are Catholic will ask to speak with a priest and to receive the sacrament of reconciliation. For those patients, working with Sue can be especially comforting because she understands the Catholic faith, its sacramental life and traditions.

## Shared faith

On a visit in January, Sue greeted patient Mary Covey with a hug and a smile. Covey, 74, has terminal colon cancer and has been in hospice care since July. A lifelong Catholic, she belongs to St. James Catholic Church and lives on the northeast side of Grand Rapids with her husband Bruce. For Covey, sharing the Catholic faith with Sue gives her "someone I can identify with on a higher level. It strengthens my faith."

The two joked back and forth during their visit. Palliative care helps manage Covey's pain and symptoms, improving her quality of life. She easily gets up from her hospital bed to greet visitors at the door. When Sue had emergency surgery in November, Covey prayed the rosary for her. During a recent visit, she presented Sue with a rosary as a gift.

"I love her," Covey says of Sue, who took the time to explain to her what to expect with cancer and how hospice works. "I love Sue's demeanor and effervescence. You need that as much as you do morphine sometimes."

## Witness to a peaceful departure

It is through those living their final days that Sue finds strength in her faith in God.

"Every day I do this it reminds me of how important my faith is," Sue said. "The biggest thing for me is my faith steadies me, guides me and gives me a lot of peace.

During her first visit with someone who was dying, Sue felt the presence of the Holy Spirit.

"I was called to this woman's side. And she believed that she should suffer as Jesus did and declined medication that would ease her pain," Sue said. "And when she died, her expression changed from a grimace of pain to a very peaceful smile. And I saw then that there was something great awaiting us."

While Sue's faith has allowed her to comfort those who are dying, it also provides her with a compass for life.

"My faith in God allows me to live in peace," she said. "I don't really think about dying a lot. This life is all about living, enjoying the moment and living a faithful life to the fullest." ☺



» Each hospice patient receives a healing shawl to help provide comfort.



» Sue visits with Mary Covey, 74, who has been in hospice care since July.