

FINAL STORIES

In death, as in life, there is a story to tell. As Hospice Nurses we often have the privilege of being present when someone's final story is written. These stories are always sad, often moving, and sometimes funny.

Mark lived alone in a small house in a small town. As his disease progressed he was unable to cook, clean, or run errands. He had no family nearby and with help from neighbors, friends, and Hospice he wanted to die in his home. We visited Mark twice a day to make meals, run errands, and do things he needed done. One evening Mark was very ill, unable to keep anything in his stomach, and bleeding from several places. Mark requested the Hospice Nurse stay with him during the night and "In the morning, I will be gone." The Nurse stayed and cared for Mark throughout the night. He was able to rest for only moments at a time and it took continual effort to keep him comfortable. Although Mark usually talked a lot, there was little conversation this night. This night was about supporting a human being whose body was shutting down. The next morning Mark took his final breath. He died in his home as he wanted, in control of his life, and on his own timetable.

Joyce was a lifelong Grand County resident. She attended a family picnic and that evening when she fell into a deep sleep her breathing changed. Hospice Nurses monitored her condition with the family and by morning Joyce was unconscious and unresponsive to pain. Family members were told Joyce would be leaving us soon. Within the hour, with family at her side, she died. Family members began arriving at the home to say good bye and comfort one another. There were teenagers and young children coming to see Joyce. After talking, they were mostly comfortable with the still body, Joyce's silence, her cooling temperature and her increasing stiffness. The family sat in a circle around Joyce in her bed and began to tell stories about Joyce's life. As a group they laughed, cried, and embraced their memories. Observing this family circle it was apparent how comfortable this family was with Joyce among them, even now that she was dead. After the Coroner visit and hours of sharing, the family was ready for Joyce to leave her home. The Funeral Home was called and they came to take Joyce's body away. As family members stood outside and children waved good bye to the van carrying Joyce's body, it was clear only Joyce's body had left this family.

We didn't know Millie very long. Her family called us on the night she was dying and they received a crash course on death and dying. When Millie died in the early morning hours, the family chose a Denver mortuary to provide her afterlife care. The mortuary dispatched a car and Hospice Nurses stayed with the family. As the hours came and went we talked and learned about this special family who had stayed with their loved one to the very end. As more hours came and went we decided something was wrong. We made calls and learned the first dispatched car had gone missing. We notified the authorities and a search began. The mortuary sent a second car and this time we gave them directions to the home suspecting a GPS had led the first car astray. When the second car arrived they wanted to know "What do you do with all this snow?" and they took Millie on her final earthly journey through the snowy landscape. We later learned the first car had been directed by technology to turn and go over Cottonwood Pass which locals know is not plowed and is impassable in winter. The driver got stuck and had no cell phone coverage. At daybreak he walked several miles back to civilization where he rendezvoused with State Patrol officers. It took CDOT equipment to finally get his car unstuck. Millie had lived her life with drama and even in death there was a drama. We have since heard the driver who got stuck is no longer working with this mortuary. We learned to caution people about using GPS in Grand County and concluded even in death learning continues.