

National Healthcare Decisions Day: A Time for Serious Talk

By Emmanuel Hospice

There are a lot of whimsical ways to celebrate April 16 – as “Eggs Benedict Day” and “Orchid Day” and even “Wear Your Pajamas To Work Day.”

But if you’re willing to get serious about what the last stage of your life might look like, you’ll want to recognize that date as “National Healthcare Decisions Day,” and plan a meaningful conversation around a topic too many of us ignore or put on perpetual hold.

“We look over something like our car insurance every six months because of something that *might* happen, but we spend very little time talking about something else that certainly *will* happen to all of us,” said Sara Lowe, executive director of Emmanuel Hospice. “The most important thing to do on National Healthcare Decision Day is to have a conversation about how you want to live.”

National Healthcare Decisions Day was instituted for that very purpose, founded a decade ago by a Virginia attorney who saw the value in creating awareness through a day dedicated to inspire, educate and empower the public and healthcare providers about the importance of advance care planning.

For Bob Eleveld and his family, having the conversation last Thanksgiving provided them the opportunity to honor the gregarious Grand Rapids lawyer’s life in an uncommon way – by throwing an end of life party for his friends *before* his death.

“We were in a restaurant in Seattle,” recalled his longtime partner, Michele McIsaac, “and you should have seen the look on the waitress’s face when Bob said ‘I want to talk about my funeral.’ ”

As it turned out, there was no funeral, but instead a huge party at Thousand Oaks Golf Club on March 18 that was attended by some 500. It was Bob’s intention to attend as well, but he grew too weak to muster the energy and died the next day.

Still, he was able to enjoy the gathering while still alive, through videos and notes of love and appreciation culled from the event and brought to his bedside that same evening.

Eleveld’s reason for bucking convention?

“He realized the difference between living, and being alive,” said McIsaac, emphasizing that her partner’s last wishes were put into place because the family made a deliberate decision to discuss it ahead of time.

“At the end of the day,” says Emmanuel’s Lowe, whose organization cared for Eleveld in his final days, “having a dialogue about what was important to Bob is what made his living until he died a reality.”

Lowe points out that there are organizations to support those talks, including one Emmanuel recommends called “Making Choices Michigan.” This nonprofit is committed to helping people discuss, decide and then document end-of-life choices in an “advance directive” that conveys those wishes in a legal document.

Without a conversation and ensuring directives in place, Lowe says a death can be compounded by loved ones trying to decipher what was written and elements that weren’t discussed ahead of time, with decisions disintegrating into a guessing game.

“When we work with families who have things clearly documented, when it comes time for decisions, it’s so much easier for them,” Lowe explained. “But without the conversation, it can be 10 times more difficult, and have a serious impact on the grieving process.”

For the Elevelds, Lowe noted, “Bob’s end of life celebration, amazing as it was, took place because of the conversation he had with people, and not just because of documents in place.”

Mclsaac said that she and other family members heard comments from more than one of Bob’s friends who attended the party like “I wish we’d done this for my dad” and “I think I’d like to do something just like this, but on the golf course.”

Lowe said she’s overheard people talking about Bob’s party in restaurants and other public places, underscoring the importance of the ripple effect his final decision had on others.

“Bob wanted to live and die differently, in his own way,” Lowe said. “From our perspective, that’s a good day’s work for us when someone has a good death, when their choices aren’t made by accident.”

Having the conversation to kick-start the process wasn’t easy, Mclsaac reflects, “but looking back now, we see how it allowed everyone to be on the same page, and that’s nothing less than a gift.”

April 16 is National Healthcare Decision Day. For more information, visit emmanuelhospice.org and makingchoicesmichigan.org.

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