

## Volunteers are the heart of hospice

By Emmanuel Hospice

On the first Wednesday of every month, Sue Jankowski spends an afternoon with eight other volunteers creating handmade cards for Emmanuel Hospice.

The volunteers gather in a small conference room to set to work. Supplies include the basics: glue, scissors, card stock. But they also add an element of life and sparkle through glitter, sparkles and other embellishments.

Not only do they make bereavement cards that are sent to family members after the death of a loved one, the card makers group creates beautiful cards for occasions from Valentine's Day to Christmas. No money is spent on this program, which relies entirely on donations – and volunteers like Jankowski.

“Emmanuel Hospice really knows their patients as individuals,” said Jankowski, who has been volunteering with Emmanuel Hospice for about a year. “They’re doing great things for patients, and I get to help with that. Everyone really looks forward to these sessions each month.”

That’s just what Heidi Draft-Peppin likes to hear. As the volunteer coordinator for Emmanuel Hospice, she relies on Jankowski and others who donate their time – and talents – to make life sweeter for patients and their families.

“Volunteers are at the heart of what we do,” Draft-Peppin says. “Dying can be extremely lonely. Our volunteers fulfill that need for companionship, so that our patients do not have to be alone.

“Members of the ‘sandwich generation’ are often caring for elderly parents and young children. The family might be pulled in many different directions. Our volunteers support the family by providing a presence so that they can go to work or run errands and know that their loved one won’t be alone.”

Volunteer opportunities at Emmanuel Hospice come in all shapes and sizes. Emmanuel Hospice currently has about 30 volunteers – and is actively recruiting more. These include:

- Office support: Volunteers work in the organization’s offices at 2161 Leonard Street SW to help out with filing, data entry and other necessary paperwork.
- Patient and family support: These volunteers go out and visit patients wherever they are living in the community, whether in a private home or nursing facility. They may read aloud, play board or card games, build puzzles, watch movies or just provide general companionship.
- Veteran volunteers: Emmanuel Hospice pairs U.S. veterans with patients who are also veterans, creating a connection that allows them to share stories with someone who has also served his or her country.
- Animal volunteers: Volunteers and their well-trained animals are also very popular, particularly with patients who have limited mobility or are non-verbal.
- Peace Partners: When a patient is actively dying and has no family or the family is unavailable, volunteers will sit at the bedside to ensure that no one dies alone.

Draft-Peppin is also excited about the Life Story project, a new program for Emmanuel Hospice in collaboration with Heritage Life Story Funeral Home where volunteers interview patients about their lives in order to capture memories, stories and words of wisdom for families and friends. Volunteers are equipped with a series of 50 questions to prompt the discussion, but often it only takes a single question to get the stories flowing.

The responses are then entered into [www.beremembered.com](http://www.beremembered.com), a free website where families receive a user name and password that allows them to log in at any time and read, edit or add to the story of their loved ones. The website lets families complete a timeline, bucket list and even create messages that will be emailed to family members at a later date. For example, if a patient is uncertain whether they will live long enough to attend a granddaughter’s wedding, an email can be drafted and saved until the appropriate time – even after the patient’s death.

A partnership with Heritage Life Story funeral homes, the Life Story program has really taken off since it was launched at the end of 2016, Draft-Peppin says.

“We have found that Life Story can make funeral planning a lot easier since the information is already gathered in one place,” she explains. “Some patients initially think we should be talking with someone who has led a more exciting life. I’ve heard patients say, ‘Oh, I’m just a housewife’ or ‘I’m just a farmer.’

“But our volunteers encourage them by saying, ‘Tell us about you. Your family wants to hear about you.’ Once people get talking, they often have all kinds of really cool stories to share.”

Prospective volunteers must pass a criminal background check and take a TB test and a flu shot. They will be asked to complete a 12-hour self-paced online study course that will introduce them to the principles of hospice and patient care through a series of videos, readings and quizzes.

What does it take to be a volunteer?

“Anyone who has a big heart and wants to be a friend to someone whose time may be short can be a volunteer,” Draft-Peppin says. “Most people are scared when it comes to death and dying. Our volunteers have the opportunity to be part of someone’s life at a really critical and important time.

“We really love and appreciate our volunteers. They tell us they find the work meaningful – and it is. Everything they do for us is critical to our success.”

#### Photo caption

The volunteers from Emmanuel Hospice recycle greeting cards to recreate unique and special cards for the patients and families each month.