

Hospice And Humility

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Editor

At death's door, renowned pediatric nephrologist Dr. Alan Gruskin knocked on his terms, thanks to hospice. His is a powerful story about coping and connecting — and dying with dignity.

He died on April 7, 2003 — six years ago this week. He was just 65. His dreams of a yearlong sabbatical in Europe were shattered when he learned he had pancreatic cancer, one of the more aggressive forms of the scary disease.

The day before an oncologist told her husband the gravity of his prognosis — “Go home and plan your funeral” — Renee Gruskin, a tower of determination, told the doctor: “Whatever you do, don't say anything that will make him lose all hope.”

The oncologist didn't listen.

I was deeply moved by Dr. Gruskin's heartrending story in the 2007-2008 issue of the Jewish Hospice & Chaplaincy Network's Hospice Heroes Make Life Better magazine. I was moved again by the JN's April 2 account of his wife's role at the March 19 JHCN forum, “The War On Pain.” Before an attentive audience, she described how hospice provided the warmth, comfort and medications so necessary for her husband to live out his life with his humility intact.

I wanted to learn more about this brave man who loved playing the piano for hospitalized kids — and his amazing wife who adopted the cause of hospice as her own. I wanted to share more of his story as JHCN marks its 10th year of service to the entire Jewish community in hopes that JN readers might consider the cause as well either as contributors or volunteers.

The Power

Let's be candid: No one knows how to die — we can only guess at it. But the journey can be less daunting with hospice.

To know the Jewish Hospice & Chaplaincy Network and its inspirational executive director Rabbi E.B. “Bunny” Freedman is to know the essence of improving life at its most vulnerable stage. No matter how sick you are, West Bloomfield-based JHCN and its compassionate embrace elevates how you think of yourself in this image-crazy world.

Before the fateful prognosis, Renee knew Alan's cancer was worsening. He had lost a lot of weight and the chemotherapy was ineffective. “But Alan still had a glimmer of hope,” Renee said. “And I didn't want to take that away from him.”

Today, Renee is a JHCN volunteer — and a force to be reckoned with in the orbit of end-of-life care.

In the Hospice Heroes article, the West Bloomfield resident recalled how the oncologist's dark prognosis, in lieu of hospice's potential benefits, devastated her husband. “He sat up in a chair all night, every night, afraid to sleep,” Renee said. “Alan felt angry, cheated. It terrified me to see him sitting on his lounge chair wasting away. The sun would set, and he would set with it.”

Unaware of options like hospice, Renee drifted and was “in tears every night.”

The Impact

Enter Jewish Hospice & Chaplaincy Network on a friend's recommendation. “It was a godsend to Alan and me as he was submerged in a sea of fear,” Renee told me last week.

Rabbi Freedman's uplifting staff includes patient coordinator Nathan Shiovitz, who I went to high school with in Detroit and who is so compassionate with the patients. He's truly honored to work with them.

The entire JHCN staff brought a sense of calm, consistency and caring into the Gruskins' home — and a lesson in better understanding death as part



Renee Gruskin



Dr. Alan Gruskin

of the life cycle. Here's how Renee put it: “They brought us the medications that helped manage Alan's overwhelming psychic fears and emotions as well as the physical pain and problems.”

They also grasped family concerns.

Against a backdrop of CDs of Alan's concert-style piano music playing, Rabbi Freedman talked to Alan about sports, music and family. He also reconnected Alan with Rabbi Harold Loss of Temple Israel in West Bloomfield. Together, Alan and Rabbi Loss contemplated the immortality of the human spirit.

“Frankly, as a caregiver during that period of my life,” Renee said, “I feel the hospice staff saved me from having a breakdown from physical and mental exhaustion.”

If that's not a lock-tight testimonial for the role of hospice, I don't know what would be. It captures what hospice can do by tapping into something as basic as human connections.

Alan calmed down in the presence of hospice and its nurturing, respectful ways. He became more accepting of his fate. Renee was settled as long as he was calm.

The Outreach

At Rabbi Freedman's urging after Alan died, Renee decided to rally for change and move hospice front and center as a mainstream alternative to “Go home and plan your funeral.”

Her perseverance convinced the Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit to add a new dimension to what senior medical students learned about the spiritual and emotional sides of end-of-life care.

In the Hospice Heroes article, Dr. Robert Frank, executive dean of the Wayne State medical school, said Renee “really did make a difference.”

“It is hard to listen to her story and not want to get things moving in this direction,” he said. “She was challenging us; we accepted that challenge and began to set up new programs. We were enlightened by her experience. She had a huge impact on all of us.”

It's not easy being a hospice volunteer, but no one is excluded from giving the training a try. The team approach to palliative care is a boost for the physical, emotional and spiritual soul.

As welcomed as hospice can be amid the throes of dying, its use has only begun to grow in the Jewish community. It now touches more than half of all Jews who die in Metro Detroit.

Jewish Hospice & Chaplaincy Network is an independent organization of special people serving as God's angels.

Take it from Renee Gruskin, who learned late about its existence and is now one of its ardent ambassadors: “I will always be grateful for what it did for me and my family.” ■

To support JHCN go to www.jewishhospice.org or call (248) 592-2687.