

Hospice nurse a special calling for dedicated staff

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By Megan Carella, For the Chronicle

 <div class="source">MEGAN CARELLA/For the Chronicle</div><div class="image-desc">From left, HPH Hospice Social Worker Betsy Shamany, Hilda Savage, HPH Hospice Nurse Jessica Hoag. Hoag arranged for the 101st birthday celebration of her patient, Hilda Savage, on March 9 in Crystal River.</div><div class="buy-pic"></div>

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From left, HPH Hospice Social Worker Betsy Shamany, Hilda Savage, HPH Hospice Nurse Jessica Hoag. Hoag arranged for the 101st birthday celebration of her patient, Hilda Savage, on March 9 in Crystal River.

As a child growing up in Citrus and Sumter counties, Jessica Hoag was fascinated when missionaries would visit her church and talk about the places they'd visited and the people to whom they ministered.

She found her own mission a bit closer to home, caring for patients nearing the end of life and their families as a nurse for HPH Hospice in Citrus County.

"From my very first experience, I found hospice nursing to be a place where you can do such good," she said. "You are coming into a patient's and family's lives when they are in a place where they are receptive, willing and wanting your guidance and support."

Hoag's 10-year career has covered the spectrum of nursing experience, from hospital to public health, mental health to school nursing and, for the last three years, hospice.

She appreciates the collaborative environment of working with a hospice team, which generally includes a doctor, nurses, aides, a social worker, chaplain and volunteers. Although hospice nursing might appear to be just about pain management, in reality it is so much more, said Hoag, who is working to earn a certified hospice and palliative nurse credential.

"Hospice nurses must have a strong foundation in nursing and be good communicators," she said.

"You have to be able to ask the right questions, deliver information accurately and gain the trust of patients and their caregivers.

"We're caring for people in their homes and they aren't looking to go to the hospital, they want to stay home," she added. "Hospice nurses must determine the cause of a patient's symptoms in order to treat those symptoms. Since a hospice patient may not be seeing a physician every day, the nurse acts as the physician's eyes and ears. The way the nurse presents information helps the doctor and the whole team with the patient's care plan."

Caring for terminally ill patients might seem like a depressing job, but it has many rewards, Hoag said. While she does get attached to her patients, she believes caring for them has made her a better nurse.

"I'm an advocate and an educator and when I step into that home I'm fulfilling my life's work," she said. "It is so rewarding and so genuine when I can work with the family and provide comfort or understanding."

The rewards of her job present themselves in many different ways. Most hospice team members make every effort to reach out to loved ones after a patient's death to see how they are handling the loss. She recalls worrying about "Tom," the son of a patient who had not returned her calls after his father's death. "After the patient passes, you don't know what the family members might be feeling," she said. "Even though the death is expected, they still may experience anger."

Tom's call was different, though, as he talked to Hoag about the last days of his father's life.

"Father and son had been estranged until this final illness. For Tom, this end-of-life experience was a golden time that had been a lifetime in the making," she said. "He went on to say, 'I just wanted to tell you that my dad always knew you were in his corner. If you ever have a day that you feel you shouldn't be doing this, you give me a call, you are right where you need to be.'"

"Sometimes you don't think what you do is that big of a deal," Hoag said. "It means so much to make a difference."