

Hospice nurse provides comfort to patients, families in Lakeland

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By Gary White

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"But now I get it."

Maxwell, a Mulberry resident, went beyond merely understanding her mother's career choice. Though it took some time, she eventually emulated it.

Maxwell, 54, now works as a care coordinator for Good Shepherd Hospice covering northeast Lakeland. Just as her mother once did, Maxwell spends her days tending to people whose lives are expected to end within months.

She describes her vocation as deeply rewarding.

“I love it; I truly do,” she says. “It’s the hardest job I’ve ever loved.”

Hospice and palliative care, an area of medicine that emerged in recent decades, focuses on providing comfort and easing the suffering for people in the late stages of terminal illness. A patient is eligible for hospice care with a doctor’s prognosis that death is expected within six months to a year. Maxwell says a patient might live beyond that projection but remain under hospice care if a doctor determines his or her condition is declining.

In some cases, patients improve to the point they “graduate” and leave hospice care, Maxwell says.

The nurses who gravitate toward hospice care are deeply empathetic and highly motivated, says Dr. Robert Weissenger, medical director for Good Shepherd Hospice. It’s not a job for someone fresh out of nursing school, he says, because it takes life experience to connect with dying patients and their families.

Among hospice nurses, Weissenger says, some stand out for their ability to handle the autonomy that comes with tending to patients in their homes and without a doctor’s direct supervision.

“So there’s a subset of good hospice nurses who are extremely good hospice nurses, and Lisa is one of those,” Weissenger says. “I think, first of all, she has a very committed and passionate attitude toward end-of-life care.”

Indeed, Maxwell refers to hospice care as “my ministry.”

It took her a while to reach that calling. Maxwell first became a cosmetologist and owned a hair salon in her native Tampa for several years. As her mother neared retirement, though, Maxwell decided to make a career change.

“I figured at age 40, if I’m going to do it I had best do it,” she says.

Maxwell finished nursing school in 2009. Though she wanted to become a hospice nurse, she says her mother advised her to get experience in other areas first.

Maxwell, who has cascading waves of light brown hair, worked in infectious disease and cardiology and then in a catheterization laboratory. She joined Good Shepherd in 2012, first as part of a nursing pool and later as a case manager. She received a state certification for inserting central catheters and vascular access devices and now serves as the “go-to person” in the Lakeland office for inserting infusion lines, says Debbie Smith, a clinical manager in the office.

As a care coordinator, Maxwell works under Smith to supervise Good Shepherd’s Rose Team, which tends to patients in Lakeland. (Good Shepherd is part of Chapters Health, which operates in Polk, Highlands and Hardee counties). The team includes four nurses, four aides, a chaplain, a social worker and a volunteer coordinator.

Maxwell has also earned the role of “preceptor,” meaning she trains and mentors newly hired nurses in the Lakeland office.

Hospice nurses face many emotional demands. The nurse must attend not only to the patient but also to family members, who sometimes misunderstand the nature of hospice care, Smith says. Patients and their families sometimes have conflicting ideas about medications and other treatments.

“Lisa’s really good about going in there and defusing situations and helping educate them in a nonthreatening way,” Smith says. “To have that ability to go in and talk to people at one of the worst times in their lives and teach them and have them feel that you’ve partnered with them; you’re not speaking at them, you’re not bossing them around, acting like they don’t know what they’re doing — that takes finesse to do that.”

Whereas a hospital nurse is focused mostly on the patients’ needs, Maxwell, who typically manages about 20 patients at a time, says hospice nurses are attuned to the entire family. And hospice nurses are forced to handle emotional demands as well as medical challenges.

“In the beginning, I had a really hard time with it,” Maxwell says. “You want to show a compassionate side, but you can’t fall apart, obviously, at the family’s house. I cry all the time with my patients, but I don’t fall apart to the point I’m not able to function for them.”

Smith says Maxwell stands out as a highly competent nurse who also possesses the needed intangibles for the job.

“We use the term ‘hospice heart,’ ” Smith says. “She truly cares about her patients. If one of her patients is in trouble, she goes that extra mile to make sure they’re taken care of.”

Hospice patients aren’t always ready to accept a doctor’s judgment that death is imminent. Maxwell recalls a man who had colon cancer.

“He said, ‘I don’t need hospice; I don’t want hospice. I’m not that sick. You’re wasting your time,’ ” Maxwell says.

She told the man she would leave but asked him to think about it for a week. If he remained opposed to hospice care, she would cancel the arrangements.

When she returned the next week, the man agreed to receive care only after making Maxwell promise she wouldn’t take control of his life and radically change his medication schedule. The man began calling Maxwell “my drill sergeant,” but the pair bonded over their shared devotion to rescuing dogs.

When the man died after eight months, he bequeathed to Maxwell his “puppy tree,” a homemade structure to which the man had added a dog ornament each Christmas. Maxwell’s eyes water and her speech falters as she describes adding an ornament each year and sending a picture of the puppy tree to the man’s family.

“When we lose a patient, it’s not just the patient we don’t see anymore — it’s the whole family. It’s the kids, it’s the dog, it’s the cat,” Maxwell says. “It’s tough ... You just have to realize this person you just met, you’re eventually going to be giving him a final bath.”