

## *The Dream Maker*

*By Tammy Summers Wolff, MSW*

I get to know patients as people, not as a diagnosis or a prognosis. Finding that sweet spot of their humanity makes my job fulfilling as I strive to make their last days as rich as possible.

The focus on individualized patient care at hospice thrills me. My job is rewarding and challenging at the same time. I never know what the day will bring, so I get to use all my previous work experience to face demanding patient and family issues with 360-degree awareness of what makes people tick and how I can make a difference. I see them as much more than patients; they are not defined by a disease. I feel cheated if a patient dies within two days of admission because I never got to know them as a person and I missed being able to give them something special as they faced the end of life.

A couple of years ago, I discovered my specialty as a hospice medical social worker: I am the Dream Maker! I work with people until I discover what it is that would warm their heart, make them smile or bring back a treasured memory. The first dream I fulfilled was for 102-year-old Hedy, who had owned horses since age 20. She didn't want to ride again...she wanted to kiss a horse! A gentle racehorse named Risky was found. Being on the horse farm and petting the horse's sleek brown nose was so overwhelming she lost the courage to pucker up. Ever the lady, Hedy was satisfied feeding him carrots and tickling his whiskers. Hedy's dream-come-true received widespread attention when the Associated Press picked up the story. I believe that my dream-making inspired other hospices across the nation.

Soon, another opportunity came along from a 90-year-old who would not crack a smile. In fact, grumpiness was as good as it got. I learned that in her youth she had traveled with the circus as a trick-horse rider and that those days on the road were the best of her life. When the Shriners Circus came to town, I arranged for transportation and VIP seating. Off we went on that Saturday. After the show, she gave me a big grin—something no one thought was possible. That smile was a great reward.

In Florida, snow is hard to come by; darned near impossible unless you have a snow machine. This idea came to me as I was sitting with Fanny, a nursing home patient, who was longingly staring at the facility's Christmas tree. Her daughter explained that she loved the holidays, and was always sorry she'd never had a White Christmas. She had never even seen snow. I thought about a snow globe. No, too small. Then Styrofoam. No, too fake. I located a community group to donate a snow machine. The mechanism is inside an inflatable snowman, so the effect is wintry and wonderful, not to mention I dressed him in a bright blue Hospice of Marion County T-shirt. Fanny got her snow day and a snow fight to boot with white shower loofahs. Fanny passed on shortly after, so we renamed the Snowoman "Fanny" who makes the rounds to other facilities, delighting the residents. Fanny lives on!



*Tossing Fanny a snow "ball" loofah.*

The roar of motorcycles isn't usually what you hear in the driveway of an assisted living center. But that's exactly what happened when Della, my 93-year-old patient, shifted from her wheelchair to the



*Helping Della onto a Harley*

back of Harley. I worked with the Shriners again so this “motorcycle mama” could get in one last ride, complete with an escort and drill team. Della, whose first bike was a 1950 Indian Scout, exclaimed, “What fun!” as she dismounted. We continued to enjoy her “ride” when her photograph was published in *New Rider* magazine (August 2012).

Wishes come in all shapes and sizes: a Veteran made the Honor Flight to the WWII Memorial; Christmas Eve dinner was provided to a widower by his favorite eatery, and I even stood in for a patient in a fashion show when she was too ill to walk the runway. At least she heard her named called!

Recently, many of us from the hospice staff were involved in the renewal of vows for a couple in a memory care center. They were also the parents of our finance manager, so many of us came together to decorate and help with the gown and ceremony. It was one of the most touching events any of us had participated in. As the groom, dressed in his WWII uniform, emitted a surprisingly strong “I DO,” his 90-year-old bride grabbed his face for a kiss, sealing the deal.

A few months later, I received a bouquet of roses which I decided to give to the bride. Just an hour after my visit, her husband died. Her daughter was deeply touched because for years her father had gifted her mother with her favorite flowers – roses. Immediately, I felt like God had intended those roses for her, not me. I was merely the instrument. He must have known I would make sure they went to the right person.

I am gratified that I can be a calming force; I sing to those who have no family; I diligently work to build trust and encourage families to get to “know” me. Until now, I never worked for an organization that was so supportive of social workers and their patients’ smallest needs, which can turn out to be their greatest desires or bring back precious memories. It is an incredible privilege to fulfill wishes and make dreams come true, because, after all, it’s not my wish that needs fulfilling—it’s theirs.