

Bloom Project brightens days for Hopewell House hospice patients

By KC Cowan
The Southwest Portland Post

When a person goes into hospice care, it can be an emotional, stressful time for them and their family. At Hopewell House in Hillsdale, staff and volunteers help make the transition as easy as possible.

And quietly, one group has been brightening that ordeal by donating floral arrangements every week, for every patient.

It's called The Bloom Project, and is the brainchild of Heidi Berkman, who in 2007 worked as an event planner in Bend. She was frustrated to see the enormous amount of wasted flowers.

At the same time, she had a loved one in hospice care. Thus, the seeds were planted for what is now an organization that utilizes hundreds of volunteers to sort, arrange, and deliver beautiful bouquets of flowers that were destined to be thrown out to hospice and palliative patients. In 2012, she brought the project to Portland.

Berkman said as a country, we do not like to talk about death, even with growing awareness of death with dignity. The word hospice scares many.

"As a result, we wait to be told what we can do or when and if we can visit," said Berkman. "It is during this time that patients and their family members

can benefit from the gift of flowers."

Because patients are often confined to their beds, arrangements are compact enough to sit on a bedside table. Not only is there delight for the patients when the flowers arrive in the rooms, Berkman said it also helps the staff. It lifts their morale and gives them a positive interaction with their patients.

"They are no longer the 'angel of death,' but, rather, someone that is bringing a thoughtful gift of something colorful, beautiful and alive," she explained.

Flowers near the end of their "sellable life" are donated by flower shops and grocery stores. Volunteers pick them up and take them to Teufel Holly Farms where owner Larry Teufel has donated space in a greenhouse for The Bloom Project to use as a workspace. Then more volunteers sort and deliver them to hospice homes all over town.

Kathy MacDougal has been sorting and arranging bouquets for Hopewell House for three years. She said some weeks there is a wonderful variety, and sometimes not so much. They must also sort and discard the flowers that are on their last legs.

"And we're very careful with that," MacDougal said. "Because the goal is to have the bouquets last at last five days, hopefully more."

Berkman said The Bloom Project could not exist without the more

than 300 dedicated volunteers in Bend and Portland. "We have a detailed training program that each volunteer is required to complete, prior to volunteering on a regular basis," she said.

"Each person attends an orientation and introduction to processing flowers, then a floral training session. Following that, each volunteer who wishes to work with flowers will meet with a mentor for a minimum of three mentoring sessions before graduating."

The project has grown so much that bouquets are also made for patients who are in palliative care in their own home. Volunteer Chaplain Eric Smith picks up flower arrangements for 20 to 25 home hospice patients each week.

"To see people's faces—their faces light up with joy and they'll smile," Smith said. And if the patient isn't able to appreciate the blooms, the caregivers certainly do. "I like to give them a rose and say: For all you do,

this bud's for you!"

MacDougal said they routinely receive thank you cards from family members of hospice patients. It helps reinforce the value of their efforts.

"I've done volunteer work my whole life and it's the only thing I've done where it just always feels like it is time well spent," she said. "It's the simplest gesture, and yet it means so much."



Carol Blanus (left), volunteer coordinator at Hopewell House poses with volunteer Kathy MacDougal and that week's flower delivery. (Post photo by KC Cowan)



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