

# Volunteer leads with compassion at Hospice by the Bay

By **EMILY LAVIN**  
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**A**s a patient- and family-support volunteer for Hospice by the Bay, Nancy Cole regularly interacts with people when they're at their most vulnerable.

"There's pain there," Cole says. "Death is imminent, there's fear, there's 'How do I cope with grief?'"

In each case, Cole's message to the terminally ill and their family members is clear.

"I'm somebody that comes in, I'm not a doctor, I'm not a social worker," says Cole, 65. "I'm just here for compassion, for comfort, for entertainment, for whatever they need."

The Belvedere resident has been volunteering regularly with Hospice by the Bay for the past five years, providing end-of-life companionship to patients in homes, hospitals and care facilities. Sometimes she's a friendly face to talk to; other times, she's simply a silent, comforting presence in the room. She may be there to relieve family members so they can run errands or take a moment to themselves. A couple of times, she's held vigil at patients' bedsides.

"To have somebody there that helps you die with dignity, that's what Hospice by the Bay is all about," Cole says. "It's making sure that they know that up until the last minute that they're loved and they have care."

A quick Google search led Cole to Hospice by the Bay several years ago. She was recently divorced and had moved onto a friend's property in Belvedere. Multiple cervical-spine surgeries had limited how much she could work, so Cole had the time and the desire to give back.



CLARA LU / FOR THE ARK

**Nancy Cole sits in front of Hospice by the Bay's Larkspur headquarters. The Belvedere resident has spent the past five years as a patient- and family-support volunteer for the nonprofit, providing end-of-life companionship to hospice patients in homes, hospitals or care facilities.**

Hospice by the Bay was the first result she saw when she searched online for volunteer opportunities.

"I thought, 'Oh my god, that would be perfect,'" she says.

Cole, who grew up in Maryland, spent seven years working as a nurse before she relocated to California and transitioned into selling accounting software.

Her mother died of pancreatic cancer at age 53, when Cole was just 20; her father passed 10 years later, at the age of 60, after a prolonged battle with cancer.

Cole says she connected with the mission of Hospice by

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**Laura Belluomini MSN, RN, CCM, Founder**

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"I would get tubs and tubs in front of my house," she says.

Her daughters would often come along to help pass out items, too. Dunn recalls the time she asked one of her daughters what she wanted for her birthday and her daughter responded, "I want to pass stuff out."

Dunn was introduced to beanie making in San Diego, where she and her daughters were members of a girls youth group called Gutsy Girls that was started by Dunn's friend Clay. Gutsy Girls encouraged middle-school-aged girls to participate in community projects. A mom in the group had the idea to host a beanie-making class, which spurred Dunn's beanie-making frenzy that has yet to stop.

Dunn estimates she has passed out hundreds of knit hats to the homeless in both San Diego and the Bay Area. She carries them in the back of her car, along with other essential items, and if she sees someone who she feels could use a hat, she pulls over, opens her trunk and lets them choose any hat they want.

Clay calls Dunn's dedication to helping those who may be suffering hardship "amazing."

"She's a visionary," Clay says. "She's fearless. She's a mentor."

Dunn says the aspect of the experience that touches her soul goes far beyond simply supplying people with items they need; it's the connection she feels with the people she helps.

"What became so apparent was that it wasn't about the beanie for people," she says. "It was about the interaction. It was touching to people that I wanted to stop and chat. It was touching to them that someone would take the time to make something handmade."

One of Dunn's daughters, Nicole Dunn, says her mom always communicated the importance of giving back while she and



CLARA LU / FOR THE ARK

**Alicia Dunn estimates she has passed out hundreds of her hand-knitted beanies to those in need. She carries them in the back of her car, along with other essentials, so she can give them away at any time.**

her sister were growing up; when she and her sister were little, Nicole says, their mom would take them to set up a lemonade stand outside the pet store to raise money for local animal shelters.

When Nicole, now 27, first heard her mom was making beanies for the homeless, she wasn't surprised.

"Her golden rule and main parenting staples were making sure we always did unto others as we would want them to do unto us," says Nicole.

She says her mom has told her that some of the people she gives beanies to and converses with have not heard their names said in months.

"For her to develop relationships with people who are lacking that connection in their lives is so meaningful," Nicole says.

Those small connections she is able to make with the recipients of her beanies are important to Dunn. The interactions have also helped her better understand the homeless population and some of the misconceptions about those who are living on the streets.

"These are people who have liter-

ally been hit with hard times," she says. "Everyone has a story, and everyone is human. They are real people."

Because of her experiences, Alicia Dunn says the homeless issue has become much more "dimensionalized" for her. When she moved to Marin, joining both of her daughters in the Bay Area, she was struck by the income inequality in the area, which she says is more prevalent than in any other community she's lived in.

She's found no shortage of support for her beanie project. A post she made on NextDoor seeking yarn donations resulted in a year's worth of supplies. She is also thinking about teaching knitting to other people in her community in hopes of multiplying the project's impact and encouraging others to connect with those in need.

"It's so much more than just a beanie," Dunn says.

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She heard about Marin Villages through local resident Dellie Woodring, who is the chair of the organization's advisory council.

Tiburon resident Cheri Sorokin, who serves on the steering committee of Tiburon Peninsula Village, called Powell a dedicated volunteer, noting she helps out in the Marin Villages office and at the annual Marin Senior Fair in San Rafael.

"She is a prime example of older people out there doing things, staying engaged in their community through their volunteer work," Sorokin says. "Most of our volunteers are 70-plus and may not need transportation help yet but are building the kind of caring community they would have for themselves at some point."

Many people who may hesitate to ask friends to drive them to errands and appointments rely on the organization's volunteers to help them with those tasks, with Marin Villages providing a way for seniors to make new friends and connections.

Belvedere resident Geri Kuhns says she views Marin Villages as more than just transportation and notes she views Powell as a friend.

"She is a kind and lovely person, thoughtful, truly caring, upbeat, interesting and fun to be with," Kuhns says. "She's a real inspiration for me."

Kuhns says she thinks Powell, like all Marin Villages volunteers, has the "helping gene."

Powell climbs on the rowing machine at her gym every day without fail to stay in shape. Twice widowed, she was a single mom to her son, who is grown and lives in Berkeley.

Powell will turn 90 in February and notes she is lucky to have "good health and a positive attitude." She plans to continue volunteering with Tiburon Peninsula Village, as she says the opportunity fits perfectly with her lifestyle.

*Contributing writer Ann Mizel is a long-time Strawberry resident and has been with The Ark since 1987.*

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the Bay — which provides hospice and palliative care and grief counseling and support throughout the counties of Marin, San Francisco, San Mateo and Sonoma and in the city of Napa — because she's able to empathize with those dealing with end-of-life issues.

"I think it's having gone through personal loss and knowing what that feels like and wanting to help in any way that I can," Cole says. "Grief is a very heavy, heavy thing to hold on to, and you need somebody to help you."

Hospice by the Bay has an extensive vetting process for prospective volunteers that includes phone and in-person interviews, a background check and a comprehensive 30-hour training.

"This is not a volunteer role for everyone, and we have pretty high standards for folks coming into our program," says Carol Watts, the nonprofit's patient-care volunteer coordinator.

Cole's desire to serve others was evident from her initial interest in working with the organization, Watts says, adding that Cole has demonstrated an innate ability to connect with the patients she serves — partly due to her personality.

"She's incredibly bright and cheerful," Watts says, noting that when Cole walks into a room, "it's like somebody turned the light switch on."

Each patient entering hospice is different, and Cole has been able to easily adapt to each individual's needs.

"She really tries to find out what their likes are and then brings that forward," Watts says. "That's one of the most important things in doing this work, establishing connections with the patients and with their families, and she does a really good job in finding where to connect."

Hospice by the Bay has strict rules about the kinds of duties volunteers like Cole can perform. For instance, they can't provide medical care or feed patients; their duties are strictly defined as companionship or relief care.

When Cole enters a home or care facility as a Hospice by the Bay volunteer, she knows she's not only there for the patient; she's there to support the family as well.

In many cases, Cole says, the patients are comfortable; some are even in a comatose-like state.

"The family, they're the ones who are falling apart, they're the ones who need the compassion and the understanding," Cole says.

She helps by giving them what she can, whether it's a few hours to grocery shop or a chance to talk or vent about their feelings or frustrations.

Being able to fill that need is something she treasures.

"Even if it's just for a brief period of time, I'm part of somebody's family," she says.

Cole says she's been struck by the devotion she's seen caregivers display as their loved ones are dying.

"I've just learned that there's a lot of humanity out there," she says. "There's a lot of love, there's a lot of compassion. There's a lot of very lucky people to have the support that they do."

Cole remembers being asked to attend the funeral service of one patient she visited through Hospice by the Bay.

There were more than 150 people at the funeral, she says, but the woman's family lit up when they saw her walk in the door.

"They were so happy to see me," Cole says — and that experience drove home the impact of her volunteer work.

"I was somebody that was part of a team of people that just cared," Cole says. "They knew I was coming from a place of compassion and no judgment and that I just cared."

Though volunteers are allowed to attend services after a patient dies, they're not permitted to continue any relationships

they formed with family members, at least for a couple of years. Cole says. That can be difficult, she says, especially if she's grown close to the family — but that doesn't mean the relationship disappears from memory.

"You don't really let it go," she says. "It's something that you store. You save it up for the next person, and you have a memory bank of all these experiences and it really just makes you better."

Cole says she has traveled throughout Marin to volunteer for Hospice by the Bay and is usually visiting a couple of patients a week. She'll often ask the organization for patients it is having a hard time matching with a volunteer, she says.

She says she gets the same reception with each assignment.

"Every time you walk into a new home or a new facility or whatever the environment is, you're welcome, you're wanted," she says. "I haven't had one situation where anybody made me feel like I wasn't wanted."

Volunteering for Hospice by the Bay has given her a unique sense of purpose, Cole says.

"I'm honored to be able to go into somebody's home and play this role," she says.

*Emily Lavin is The Ark's assistant editor and Strawberry reporter. Reach her at 415-944-3841.*