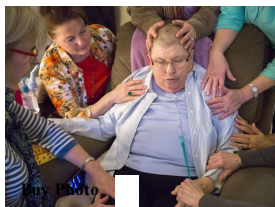


# Hospice is about life, dying nurse says

Daniel P. Finney, [dafinney@dmreg.com](mailto:dafinney@dmreg.com) 4:15 p.m. CDT March 23, 2016



(Photo: Rachel Mummey/The Register)

Joyce Hutchison takes short, fast breaths. The 75-year-old knows they are among her last.

She is dying of lung cancer. Her doctor says she has a month left, maybe two.

The brink of death is a familiar place for Hutchison. Nearly 40 years ago, she helped establish hospice care in Iowa.

She was the first nurse hired at the first hospice house in the state, Hospice of Central Iowa, and in the years since has helped scores of patients and their families accept death.

Now she faces her own.

"I am not afraid to die," she said. "I might be afraid of what I have to do to get there. But I am not afraid of death."

Before she gets there, Hutchison wants to help those traveling a similar path one more time.

She is writing a book that shares the lessons she has learned while dying.

"Even though I know I've only got a month or two left, I try to enjoy every moment as the blessing it is," she said.

That she is spending her final days making a gift for the dying and grieving says much about her.

"That's so Joyce," said Kathi Sircy, a friend and a member of her prayer circle. "Even facing what she is facing, she is still thinking of how she can help others."

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## Being there for her patients

Hutchison grew up in Leon in southern Iowa, one of five children, including a twin brother. She attended a one-room schoolhouse.

She earned a nursing degree from Mercy College of Health Sciences in Des Moines.

She married her childhood sweetheart, Gary Hutchison, in 1962. The couple had three children — Joe, Mike and Julie.

In 1970, doctors diagnosed Gary with lymphoma of the stomach. They said he had six months to live. Their children were ages 2, 4 and 5 at the time.

The prognosis proved mercifully inaccurate. Gary lived another 24 years.

He died in 1994. They were not easy years — the specter of his health hung over the family.

But he embraced life, with his death always on the edges of perception.

Joyce was an oncology nurse when Gary's poor health began pulling her in a different direction.

One night after work, she sat in her car and cried. It was one of those days when the hospital was short-staffed from a flu outbreak.

Her shift was one long sprint — hanging chemotherapy bags, administering pain medicine and taking what seemed like gallons of blood.

“But what I hadn't done all day was look a patient in the eye and really talk to them,” Joyce said. “I vowed I would never do that again.”

## **Hospice isn't 'giving up'**

In 1977, she was reading a shopper and spotted a small article about an informational meeting on hospices. She and Gary decided to go.

Five people showed up, including Joyce and Gary. The session was led by Sister Eve Kavanagh, who had come to Iowa at the request of a fellow nun to help start hospice care here.

Hospice was common in England and parts of Europe. But in the United States, people likened hospice to giving up on life.

“We would go to doctors and ask for their support and they would say, ‘Oh, I think that's a wonderful idea, but I can't put my stamp on it,’” Hutchison said. “They were afraid of getting a reputation of giving up on patients and just letting them die.”

After that initial meeting, she changed careers and became a hospice nurse. Kavanagh and others founded Hospice of Central Iowa in 1978.

Nearly four decades later, hospice is still frequently misunderstood.

“A lot of people think hospice is just a place where we give you so many drugs that you just go to sleep and don't wake up,” Hutchison said. “Hospice isn't about death. It's about life. It's about having the best quality of life you can have while dying.”

Above all else, she said, hospice is about making people comfortable.

“I'm a believer that you can't die when you're in terrible pain,” she said. “Your body responds to that pain by trying to hold on and get through it. You have to be more comfortable to let yourself die.”



*(Photo: Rachel Mummey/The Register)*

## **'You have to be present'**

Hutchison learned much from her patients and their families over the years. The most important lesson: "You have to be present. You really have to listen and understand."

"When a person is dying, there are no masks," she said. "Nobody is envious of you. Nobody wants to trade places with you. Nobody is trying to be something they're not. They are facing the ultimate reality. And it is your duty to be there for them and help them through it."

She compiled her lessons into a book, "May I Help Walk You Home? Courage and Comfort for Caregivers of the Very Ill."

She followed that with a second book, "Now That You've Gone Home: Courage and Comfort for Times of Grief."

Both books are still in print.

She co-wrote them with Joyce Rupp, an author and member of the Catholic Servite Order, who wrote the prayers for both books.

Her third, and last, book teaches the lessons she has learned while her own death comes inevitably closer.

Among the things she talks about: eating. Some days, she is simply not hungry. Her children encourage her to eat to keep up her strength.

She remembers doing the same when her own mother was dying.

"I kept trying to get her to take one more bite," Hutchison said. "Finally, Mom said, 'I feel like I've had a Thanksgiving dinner with every bite. I've eaten all my life for you kids. Let me be.' I don't think I really understood that until she explained it to me."

## **Accepting the end is coming**

In 2013, Hutchison was diagnosed with lung cancer, though she never smoked. The disease progressed, and a few weeks ago, she learned it was terminal.

She is not maudlin. She smiles easily and seems full of life, rather than someone so near the end of it.

She loves her condo, which her son, Mike Hutchison, the owner of Des Moines' Star Bar, remodeled for her after her second marriage ended.

"I've never had a dime, and now I feel like a queen in her palace," she said.

She accepts that her time is ending.

A hospice nurse visits her condo several times a week to help her with household chores, bathing and other care.

The baths are particularly scary because of the exertion and brief disconnection from her oxygen tank.

“Not being able to breathe is scary,” she said. “Sometimes I just have to sit and take as deep of breaths as I can until I settle down.”

She remains social. The kids and grandkids visit as often as possible. She’s always on the phone with someone.

She meets every Tuesday with her prayer group, women she’s known for years.

They pray. They have treats. They laugh. They cry.

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(Photo: Rachel Mummey/The Register)

## A final spring

It’s the end. Joyce knows this. But she has prepared for the moment.

“I believe God gave me this wonderful life with a wonderful husband, three beautiful children, nine grandchildren and, especially, the gift of working with the dying,” she said. “I try to live every day that God gives me in the way I was taught.”

From her favorite chair in her living room, a pair of sliding glass doors look out onto the porch of her Grand Avenue condo.

She has enjoyed the sunny, spring-like weather of recent weeks. She watches the birds and the buds sprout from the ends of tree branches that overhang her porch.

“I’m so glad it’s spring,” Hutchison said. “I told my son the other day that I’d like to see summer again. But I suppose if I saw summer again, I’d want to see a glimpse of fall and then I’d want a glimpse of another winter.

“I’ll just have to be happy with whatever I have left to see.”

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*Correction: An earlier version of this column misspelled Joyce Hutchison’s name.*

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