Dan Harris Interview Draft 1 5.26.2023

*Dan Harris lives in the Eastern Upper Peninsula of Michigan. He and his wife, Roxanne, have been volunteering at the Hospice House of the EUP since the 1980s. This is Dan's story as a volunteer caregiver.*

Serving as a volunteer caregiver started with caring for my wife's father. He died of cancer…chemo is what took him. He passed over the course of three years. We went to his house every day to help him. We did everything for him, except he wouldn’t let us help him shower or anything like that. In the third year, he was on oxygen all the time.

The Director of the Hospice of the EUP noticed us taking care of him, and after he passed, she asked if we would be interested in volunteer caregiving. They started their in-home patient care program in the 80s, and we were some of the first people they trained.

Two other people also inspired us, Sharon McLaren and Arlene Fitzmorris, both university professors who helped start the local Hospice organization and assisted us when we adopted our five children from challenging backgrounds. Even though we always had a lot going on, they encouraged us to get involved.

We've been volunteers now for 40 years, and we have done errands and cleaned house, but mostly we have done patient care.

We also have helped for years with the annual fundraiser--A Medieval Madrigal Christmas Dinner. It started small, and now 500 people show up for three nights. There are production numbers, a head table featuring local dignitaries, and many other fun elements.

My parents died of cancer, but they also inspired me to get involved. When I was a child, they once told me that if you don't like your community, do something and get involved to improve it. Not that I don't like my community—I am just trying to make it a better place.

Roxanne and I figured if we could care for our parents this way, we knew we could do it for others. Even though hospice volunteer caregiving is difficult, it is some of the most rewarding work. Your patients quickly become your friends, and it's incredible how close you can become in such a short time. Even if they’re not family and you might be a bit more objective, it’s sometimes difficult because you became friends.

One Thanksgiving, our five kids and their families went to their respective in-laws. My wife and I decided to cook Thanksgiving dinner for the only person at hospice, and her family—about nine people total.

While I was cooking, I was drinking a little wine. I played songs sung by the Rat Pack, and this lady mentioned that she liked to dance. I asked her to dance, and we did--she loved it! She then asked if she could have some wine. Then she requested some mashed rutabagas, and I told her they were on the menu because they were my grandmother's favorite. She was so happy. Watching her sit there with her children—their last dinner together was fantastic.

I'm an old scratch baker and did that for many years. Eventually, I changed careers and became the entertainment supervisor at our local casino. I got to work with all the country acts: Willie Nelson, Tammy Wynette, Glenn Campbell, and Toby Keith. I did that for a while, then went back to baking. Even though I am now retired, I still work a few days a week at our local grocery store bakery.

I believe that after World War II, the death of a family member was taken away from families and then moved to hospitals. I remember when my grandparents died at home. But after WWII, families got away from knowing and understanding the grieving process. When children can witness this process at home, they know it's okay, and it's natural. Families got away from all that, and now there seems to be many issues in people dealing with death. Hospice of the EUP started a bereavement program—to help with the death of a spouse and all that stuff you go through and to let you know that you are not alone.

Even though I am not faithful, if someone asks me to pray with them, I will because that is what they need. It's all about them and what they need. If I can help them on their path, I will.

I have been asked how I can do this work without religion. I am just helping out another human being--that's what matters.

Social Media 1:

Dan Harris, 40-year volunteer caregiver at Hospice of EUP

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Social Media 2:

Dan Harris, 40-year volunteer caregiver at Hospice of EUP

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