

HOSPICE

767

By James Collins

Hospice is where you go to die. It is usually a very somber place. This time the Irish showed up and changed all that. In early May 2014, my wife Eileen Murphy Collins became ill and started to undergo a large number of diagnostic treatments to determine the cause. By 15 May, there was a suspicion of cancer and all the family members were notified. We responded as we always do, we threw a series of parties so everyone could be together every weekend. Eileen herself set up all the arrangements with the undertaker, the church and hospice. We got the formal diagnosis of pancreatic cancer on May 28. We continued with the parties. Eileen informed us that she visited many of her friends at hospice and most were there only two days. It was a prophetic statement.

The first week after that formal diagnosis, we had a party everyone attended. I drove there with Eileen. We walked around, talked and met with everyone. We had food and listened to music. We had a marvelous time. The following week, there was another party at the same location but this time I had to bring her in and take her out on a wheelchair. She was failing fast.

The morning of Wednesday, June 11, we had a visiting hospice nurse and she agreed it was time. The ambulance showed up at 3 o'clock and within a half hour, Eileen was admitted to hospice. The admitting personnel recognized her immediately because she had been there so often to visit friends.

* * *

Around 5:30, the pastor from Resurrection parish showed up to give Eileen last rites. He had performed the initial prayers, anointed Eileen's forehead with holy oil and about 10 of us were surrounding the bed with our heads bowed and our hands clasped responding to the prayers. With that my daughter Patricia driving for more than two hours from her home in Mystic Connecticut rushed in the door with her family and she viewed the panoply of people surrounding the bed with the priest.

"Jesus Christ, I just stop for the bathroom for two minutes and she's dead!"

Without missing a beat, the priest said, "Jesus Christ is here right now." In addition, someone else said, "And she is still here with us also." These responses resulted in gales of laughter, which was very unusual for the somber setting of the hospice. But now the Irish were here.

* * *

Thursday morning the clan started to arrive. The flow of people in and out was enormous. Everybody brought some type of music and food and three different types of music were heard simultaneously. You could see patients in the other rooms. What was sad was that some of them had no visitors at all, a few had just a single visitor.

A man in his late 60s, very soft-spoken, small, and slightly built arrived at the door pushing a small keyboard on a wheeled vehicle. He indicated he was a volunteer who went around playing music for patients at hospice and wanted to know if we would like him to play for us. Of course, everyone was welcome, so they told him to come on in, sit over there, and let us hear you play. Unfortunately, they made a mistake and set him up next to me. He then started to play quiet, slow, elevator type music, which was probably appropriate for a somber location but did not lighten the atmosphere. After he stopped his first piece and was turning the pages of the music, I asked him, "Excuse me sir, could you play either YMCA or New York, New York?" He looked at me, stunned, and said, "In all the years I've been playing here no one has ever asked for a request, and I'm sorry I don't know either of those songs."

"That's all right just continue playing the songs you are comfortable with. And thank you for coming to bring comfort to my wife Eileen." With that, I turned and responded to a number of the family who were prompting me to tell various stories.

After the man left, family members came up to me and said, "Jim did you notice the little man almost fell off the chair?"

"No. When did that happen and what caused it?"

"He was leaning over trying to listen to your stories and he slipped off the seat."

* * *

Later that afternoon we were bringing food into the room and we were using the door that went into the outside alcove. My son Kevin had propped the screen door open. The inevitable happened a large fly flew in the room and landed on Eileen's stomach. I was standing right next to her as were a number of siblings and in-laws. I reach my hand back to grab the fly in they all grabbed me. "Jim you can't hit Eileen to kill the fly."

"I wasn't going to hit Eileen. A fly takes off backwards so I was going to swing over the fly and catch him in midair." With that, the fly flew over and landed on the screen. I took a swipe at the fly and ended up knocking the screen out of the window. Again the laughter started.

"Jim you are going to destroy the hospital. They will make you pay for all the broken screens."

Then I took a handkerchief and swiped it down the glass killing the fly.

“He’s dead.” I shouted in a loud voice.

“Jim you can’t yell that in a hospice. It has a very different connotation.” Again, laughter filled the halls.

At 2 o’clock in the morning, on Friday, June 13, Eileen, the love of my life and my wife of 53 years died in my arms after a two-day stay in hospice as she had prophesied.

THE END