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FREE

Bringing comfort to the dying

A Hillsdale woman's group, SacredFlight, offers music and peace to those near the end of life, and winter concerts 'for the living' on Dec. 5 & 7

By TRACY STEPP
The Connection

As Virginia Diane AComins neared the end of her life, harp and voice music at her bedside made the transition easier — for both her and her son.

"[It] adds human connection and quality to the process of dying," said son Michael Benson of North Portland. "It takes it from being just an event to a sacred, emotional, high quality moment."

It is music thanatology — prescriptive music vigils with harp and voice designed to meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of terminally ill patients and their families. Hillsdale resident Anna Fiasca, along with three other Portland music thanatologists, form SacredFlight, just such a palliative (easing pain without curing) music practice.

"It's a compassionate, non-invasive, loving way to support people through the end of life journey," Fiasca said.

WINTER CONCERTS

SacredFlight, along with music thanatologists from Providence Health System, will perform Winter Respite III — two concerts for the public featuring music from the Middle Ages through the present. Harp and voice, viola and cello will be featured. Sunday, Dec. 7 from 3-4 p.m. in Southwest at Mt. Carmel Evangelical Lutheran Church, 515 SW Maplecrest Dr. with reception to follow. On the east side, the group will perform at St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church, 1704 NE 43rd Ave., Dec. 5 from 7:30-8:30 p.m. Free admission, donations welcome. SacredFlight is a not-for-profit charitable organization and relies on donations to provide services throughout Portland. For information, to donate or to request a vigil, call 503-241-3344. Web site: www.sacredflight.org, e-mail: info@sacredflight.org.

Benson was with his mother Virginia at Hopewell House in Hillsdale as she died from cancer in March. Fiasca and SacredFlight provided Virginia, and others they serve, with peace. The musicians bring the medicinal qualities of live music directly to the bedside of patients living near death.

"From my perspective, it gives them permission to relax and leave their body," Benson said.

According to the group, common responses during vigils include eased respiratory distress and anxiety, decreased pain, deeper rest and a sense of calm and interior reflection.

For Virginia, who was in and out of lucidity and having a hard time getting meaningful sleep, SacredFlight's first visit "put her in a position to sleep and she did," Benson said.

"Morphine didn't work but the music did," he said. At another vigil, Virginia was less conscious but in horrible pain, he said, and Fiasca's improvised chant in Latin allowed his mother to "put her head down on the bed and she just floated off" to sleep.

Anywhere people need care

SacredFlight is a not-for-profit, tax exempt organization that formed in June 2001. The four harpists have served the greater Portland area with approximately 517 vigils for 341 patients as of November. They work in hospitals, in-patient hospice facilities, nursing homes, private homes, or "anywhere where people need end of life care," Fiasca said.

The four members include Fiasca, Barbara Cabot and Sharilyn Cohn from Northeast Portland and Gary Plouff from Southeast. All four have completed the two-and-one-half year graduate level academic program and clinical internship at Chalice of Repose Project School of Music Thanatology in Missoula, Mont.

A member of SacredFlight is on call from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, and the musicians return messages if called after hours. They are available on weekends by appointment. The length of the vigils are determined by the needs of the patient and loved ones, Fiasca said, but most vigils last 30-60 minutes.

Prescriptive qualities within the music support "letting go" — relieving suffering and freeing patients to move toward a peaceful death, Fiasca said. Benson said that during his mother's last vigil, which was very close to her passing, her breathing was rattled and labored, but after the vigil, she was breathing normally.

Virginia was at Hopewell House for eight days, had four vigils and died on March 17 at age 65, Benson said. And he said that the honesty and intimacy SacredFlight brought to his mother's death made him wonder why more hospitals don't support the work.

"[SacredFlight] brings a level of integrity and quality to this thing we'll all go through that seems completely absent from other medical facilities," he said.

A 'privilege to serve'

SacredFlight has contracts with several local hospitals, but due to the weak economy and limitations of funding, the members aren't always paid for their work, Fiasca said. The cost to provide a vigil is \$175. As part of their mission as music thanatologists, however, Fiasca and others offer their services to everyone, regardless of ability to pay. And even with hospital contracts, less than half the cost of the vigils they provide are covered.

SacredFlight relies on donations, and at this point the four have to work other jobs to support themselves. Fiasca said she is lucky in that her other job is still in the field she loves — she is the hospital music thanatologist on staff Tuesdays through



Photo by TRACY STEPP

Anna Fiasca plays harp in her Hillsdale home Nov. 7. Fiasca and SacredFlight provide music vigils to the dying all over Portland.

Thursdays at Mid-Columbia Medical Center in The Dalles. Fiasca, who's played viola since she was a child, said she had worked as a community volunteer there when she lived in Gorge. Once she graduated with training in music thanatology, the hospital had a position waiting for her.

When asked if she ever finds working so intimately with the dying sad or painful, Fiasca said that as a human being, she has occasionally cried at vigils. But primarily, she says the work is "like a gift."

"While I do feel sorrow for families and share their sadness at times, I would never say that I'm depressed by this work — because it affirms the beauty and power of the human spirit," she said. "I'm inspired by the people I have had the privilege to serve."