

# Young at Heart

## In Santa Cruz County

January 2022 edition

# Have aging parents? Hospice of Santa Cruz County can help

By Tara Fatemi Walker

People in their mid-50's to mid-60's frequently have aging parents in their late 70's and beyond. As our parents age, it's important to prepare ahead for the end of life, and to know what resources are available. Hospice of Santa Cruz County ([hospicesantacruz.org](http://hospicesantacruz.org)) is a fantastic local nonprofit agency, and it provides much more than hospice services.

First, the basics. "Hospice care, by definition, is provided for a person with a life-limiting illness whose doctor believes he or she has six months or less to live if the illness runs its natural course," explains HSCC Senior Director of Marketing Nancy Gere. "When a patient chooses hospice, it's often at a point when he or she understands the illness is not responding to medical attempts to cure it or slow the disease's progress. Hospice is a

benefit of Medicare. Costs are covered by Medicare, Medi-Cal, or most insurances for at least six months." HSCC often sees people waiting until the last minute to receive hospice care. With hospice, a team of healthcare professionals—hospice physicians, nurses, social workers, spiritual care counselors, aides, and volunteer visitors—support patients' medical, emotional, and spiritual needs. "The medical care is designed to provide relief from pain and symptoms. The emotional and spiritual support is for the entire family. Skilled social workers and music therapists help all parties involved find peace and even joy in this important, sacred stage of life."

HSCC also provides services which are helpful prior to traditional hospice benefits. As you notice your parents declining, it can be overwhelming to sort through their needs, understand options, and make decisions. "This is amplified when a par-



Resident music therapist, Anya Ismail, MA, MT-BC with patient Jackie Kercheval. Photo contributed by Hospice of Santa Cruz County.

ent has a life-limiting condition, and you start to worry that your time together may be limited," Nancy adds. "Focusing on something concrete can help you feel more in control of the situation and give you a place to start. Sitting down with your parent to discuss his or her healthcare wishes ahead of time and making

a plan is a gift you can give to yourself and your parents." HSCC offers help creating an Advance Directive to clearly communicate your parent's healthcare wishes so there is no question about how to proceed when the time comes, and they can't speak for themselves. Virtual group sessions or individual appointments

are available where you can learn how to identify your parent's end-of-life healthcare values, understand differences between Advance Directives and Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment Forms, and get help filling out forms.

Cathy Conway, HSCC's CEO, encourages people to learn about hospice

now instead of later. "I'm saddened when I hear members of our community say, 'if only we had known how hospice could help, we would have called sooner.' I get it... hospice can be a scary word," says Cathy. "And yet going it alone can be exhausting and often feel

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unsustainable.” People believe the myth that getting hospice care means giving up. “The truth is getting hospice care is about taking a stand and saying, I want to live my life to the fullest extent possible in the time that is remaining.”

Hospice of Santa Cruz County has been helping seniors and their family members navigate serious illness for 43 years. Services are focused on patients and helping them live their best lives. “This starts with our Transitional Care and Palliative Care services, which provide an added layer of support, in the comfort of your own home, to help manage serious illness,” says Nancy. These services “... are different from hospice care because they are typically provided earlier in a person’s life and are usually done in conjunction with curative treatments,” she explains. Your parent is eligible if the doctor believes he or she has two years or less to live if the illness runs its natural course. “Our Transitional Care team meets with families to listen, understand their needs, and connect them with community resources. Often people don’t know what they should or shouldn’t ask from their doctors, so our team helps with the planning and communication that makes their care run smoothly.”

Studies have shown hospice care is most effective when patients are with their hospice care teams for months, rather than days. “This time allows the team to guide the family as their loved one’s needs change,” says Cathy. “It also allows patients to fully participate in decisions about their care. Our hospice medical professionals can manage pain and symptoms earlier and help avoid crises and hospital stays.”

“One of the programs that sets us apart from other providers is our music therapy,” adds Cathy. “We’ve found that music, as a universal language, is a powerful tool that can bring joy and spiritual contemplation and help people reflect on their memories. Our therapists design a plan of care tai-

lored to each patient that includes creating, singing, moving to and/or listening to live music.” The agency also offers all community members—whether they’ve been a patient or not—comprehensive grief support. Information about a variety of grief support groups as well as individual counseling is available on the website.

Daleth Foster RN, CHPN (Certified Hospice and Palliative Nurse), who has been with the agency for seven years, loves the work she does as it “... unearths deep human connection close to the core of just being.” As a Visit Support Nurse, she travels to patients’ homes when they have emergent needs or fills in for Case Manager Nurses when they are not available for regularly scheduled visits. “I am tasked to respond sensitively to highly variable medical, caregiving and emotional situations. I find the focus may change during a visit, revealing new opportunities to help meet the patient and family’s wishes for comfort, safety, and self-determination. My role is rewarding, allowing me to support my coworkers and bring the best care to our patients and families.”

She refers to hospice as “an amazing program that supports patients, their families, and caregivers...when they wish to be comfortable and safe at home. Our value is we bring the equipment, supplies, medications, and most of all teaching and experience into the home. The experience of caring for a loved one at the end of life is full of unknowns, and this can be so scary without a guide. What I love the most: our training and care is guided by the patients’ and families’ self-determined goals. We help families make the choices that are best for them.”

Because of the pandemic many events are currently virtual, including these open-to-the-public programs: Essentials of Advance Directives presentations, Movie Nights (viewing and discussion about a movie that includes end of life issues; the next is Feb. 9, see [hospicesantacruz.org/event/movie-feb-22/](https://hospicesantacruz.org/event/movie-feb-22/)), and Death Cafes (where people get together to drink tea and



Past patient, Betty Morgan with volunteer Naomi Florin-Gosciminski, and her dog Bella Luna. Photo contributed by Hospice of Santa Cruz County.

talk about death). They also offer virtual Partners in Caring gatherings to support faith leaders in their efforts to help others deal with end-of-life issues. In-person events will be held in the spring depending on COVID-19 safety. Also, HSCC staff are available to host “Hospice 101” presentations to local groups, either virtually or in-person.

Interested in volunteering? HSCC has many opportunities including serving as a Volunteer Visitor; see [hospicesantacruz.org/volunteer](https://hospicesantacruz.org/volunteer). Volunteers typically visit a family once or twice a week for an hour or two, offering companionship and respite for the caregiver. Forbes Ellis, Director of Volunteer Services, says, “Volunteers are the heart and soul of hospice, giving freely of their time and energy to support our patients and families during such a tender time. Volunteers connect with patients and families in ways that help patients feel seen, heard, and respected. There is a mutual affirming of our humanity.”

74-year-old Valerie Hayes started volunteering with HSCC in 2017. “I sometimes sit quietly with my patients...I sing softly when it is appropriate. We take walks, we watch television.” She has been with several patients when they died. “I was with a patient and his wife. She was by his side, and I was softly singing. He took his

last breath and she turned to me and said, ‘You sang him to heaven, thank you.’ To have the opportunity to provide comfort and support for the patients and their families and caregivers is an honor and a privilege.”

Helen Mitchell, 69, first volunteered with HSCC in 2019. “I wanted to continue to serve after 40 years of being an RN,” she says.

“I love my community and find by volunteering that I am served in return in a meaningful way. The volunteers are welcomed and receive training that I found excellent and supportive.” She volunteers twice a week. “I visit at the bedside. I bring my patient flowers, baked goods from Companion Bakeshop, and sometimes homemade soup. I bring

the Sentinel newspaper for her. I also started bringing my laptop to play Big Band music, which she enjoys. We do life reviews, and she shares memories when prompted. We watch hummingbirds feed outside her window and two new wild kittens in the home. I hope to be providing some joy and caring at the end of a person’s life.”



Resident music therapist, Anya Ismail, MA, MT-BC with patient Jackie Kercheval. Photo contributed by Hospice of Santa Cruz County.

### ***In the past year, Hospice of Santa Cruz County:***

- ***cared for 1,049 Hospice Care patients, 207 Palliative Care patients, and eight Concurrent Care for Children patients***
- ***provided grief support sessions for 2,100 adult clients and 402 youth clients***
- ***hosted 25 grieving youth at Camp Erin***
- ***served 758 individuals through educational programs, in person and on Zoom***
- ***provided 1,161 music therapy sessions, 1,996 telehealth visits, and three socially distanced Veterans Day parades honoring veterans in our community***