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Death is part of Hernando doctor's life, and he doesn't mind

Erin Sullivan, Times Staff Writer In Print: Sunday, November 30, 2008

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Dr. Dave McGrew, medical director for Hernando-Pasco Hospice, examines Richard Mahoney in his home in Spring Hill on Friday. McGrew is a hospice veteran.



[WILL VRAGOVIC | Times]

SPRING HILL — Dr. Dave McGrew isn't afraid of death, which is hard for many people to understand. We all will die, but we don't like to think about it. We put off things we want to do. We avoid people we've wronged and don't call loved ones because it's been years already and a few more days won't hurt.

"We live in a death-denying society," said McGrew, 50, who has been the medical director for Hernando-Pasco Hospice for nearly 30 years.

His patients are people who are dying. He can't make them better, but he can help ease their pain and give them a "good death," said McGrew, this year's recipient of the Josefina B. Mango Distinguished Hospice Physician Award, a national lifetime achievement award given by the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine. He will give an acceptance speech at the academy's annual convention in Austin, Texas, in March. He feels humbled and honored.

When McGrew stumbled into this career in the early 1980s, hospice in America

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was just beginning. He said that before the hospice movement took hold, those who could not be saved usually were placed at the end of a hospital hallway and forgotten.



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McGrew was raised in Spring Hill and his father, Dan McGrew, was one of the first physicians in that part of Hernando County.

When McGrew was 16, his mother, Olga McGrew, came home with a cough and collapsed. His dad and brother gave her CPR and drove her to the nearest hospital, several miles away in Brooksville, but she was brain-dead. Her body expired a few days later. His family believes it was adult respiratory distress syndrome.

That experience changed McGrew and set him on the course of his life, though he didn't know it at the time. It made him think about end-of-life care on a personal level and from then on, he was drawn to the dying, rather than moving away from them.

He went to the University of South Florida for his undergraduate work and medical school — while working full time as a manager of a gas station and delivering newspapers from 3 to 6 a.m. (Though he cut down on work hours to get through medical school.) He met and married a woman named Dawn, who had a daughter, Toni. McGrew adopted Toni, who is now 33, and then he and Dawn had two children: Joshua, now 23, and Christa, now 22.

After graduation, he joined his father's general practice clinic, just down the street from his childhood home. He also worked at another medical clinic in Spring Hill and there, fate nudged him again.

A receptionist's teenage son was dying of a brain tumor. His name was Donny. She asked McGrew if he could help him — not to make him better, but to ease his pain. McGrew said yes and contacted Hernando-Pasco Hospice, which was just starting.

They created a team of people to help Donny and his mother —counselors, nurses, a chaplain. McGrew's job was to get Donny off of any unnecessary medicine and to control his nausea, shortness of breath and general pain. Donny died a few months later.

"I had an experience of dying well," McGrew said.

He didn't feel good having to do the job and was sad when Donny passed away. But the experience grabbed him — being on a team to let patients and families know they're not alone, to make the patient feel better, to give of yourself, and to get so much back: love and gratitude from the patient and family.

After that, the organization asked him to be its medical director. At the time, the nonprofit had about 10 patients. Now, the group has 1,000 patients and nearly a dozen locations throughout Pasco, Hernando and Citrus counties, as well as support groups, home care programs and other services. Because McGrew now oversees 15 doctors and a slew of registered nurses, he doesn't treat as many patients as he used to.

People who work in hospice, whether on staff or as volunteers, talk of how joyous and rewarding it is. But the reality of death, something most people avoid, is there every day.

So how does a man who has immersed himself in death for three decades choose to live his life? Recklessly gobbling up every experience he can, knowing that any day could be his last?

Or afraid?

Neither, actually.

He's content. Accepting the knowledge of death removes the fear. "You have to recognize you are not in control," he said. "And that reduces worry."

He eats candy corn and steak, and whatever else he wants, but in moderation. He always has several projects going at once that he feels compelled to tackle and conquer before moving on to the next thing. Sometimes he hears about a craft or sometimes one hobby leads to the next — such as rescuing and rehabilitating injured birds leading to falconry.

Right now it's woodworking, making stained glass and a computer game called World of Warcraft. Some of his past obsessions have been knitting, twilling, crocheting, paintball, computer programming, spear fishing, scuba diving, rebuilding car engines, tae kwon do and musical instruments: violin, organ, piano, clarinet and the saxophone.

He doesn't let things sit that can be dealt with today — apologies, regret — living his life with

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his emotional state in order. He says that many people in hospice who die peacefully are ones who have resolved the things that can gnaw at a person's soul.

"For those of us working in hospice, we take each day of life a bit more seriously," he said.

He is a devout Christian. He believes in kindness and karma. He says many people who work in hospice are spiritual, whether those feelings have a religious label or not. He said many patients see dead loved ones as they get closer to death. It comforts them.

"Life is not about us," he said, popping a few pieces of candy corn in his mouth.

"It's bigger than us."

Erin Sullivan can be reached at esullivan@sptimes.com or (813) 909-4609.

Where to call

To get care

For information on Hernando-Pasco Hospice, go to www.hphospice.org or call toll-free

1-800-486-8784.

[Last modified: Dec 01, 2008 01:35 PM]

Comments on this article

by **cynedra**

Dec 01, 2008 01:35 AM

It is a very nice story and it sounds like he is a wonderful man, but the numbers don't add up correctly for me. If he is 50 as stated in the article, and has done this for 30 years, then he was already a doctor at age 20.

by **anthony**

Nov 29, 2008 11:54 AM

what a great story, and a great person

by **Tom**

Nov 29, 2008 11:48 AM

What a great story. Nice to read about a spring hill boy coming home to give back to the community. Too bad we dont have more docs like this.

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