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Huntsville woman dedicates years of

By **Kristin Edwards**
 Staff Reporter

When Marilyn Louther became a registered nurse, she planned to use her education to meet the needs of ill individuals.

At least, that was what she planned to do.

"I have the educational background of being a registered nurse, where you meet the needs of people who are ill," she said. "That's what I'm all about — identifying and meeting those needs."

Then, around 1992, she realized her role as a nurse was limiting her from caring for patients to the best of her ability.

"Five of the 80 patients I was taking care of were dying, and there was no service for them," she said. "Those were very difficult years for me, because as a nursing staff, we were so limited as to what we could provide them. It was impossible."

Louther realized she wanted to institute a system in Huntsville which would provide more extensive and personal care for the terminally ill.

"I saw the need for hospice — I mean, we were in the trenches, so we knew the need," she said. "I went to the nursing homes and hospitals to ask if they were interested in starting it."

"When they said no, I said, 'OK, fine, we'll do it,' and we opened Thee Hospice in January of 1993."

Getting started

Compared to basic medical care, Louther said hospice care is designed to provide physical, emotional and spiritual care and comfort for their patients during their last stage of life and to support families during a difficult time.

When Louther started Thee Hospice, she realized a considerable amount of planning and work would be involved.

"To make hospice work, we had to get the community involved," she said. "We could only get it to work with volunteers and fundraisers because the government reimbursement wasn't enough back then, and it still isn't."

Louther didn't just have to recruit volunteers for Thee Hospice — she had to train them, as well.

"She established the structure for the volunteers to function in, which included the policies and guidelines they would need to follow," said Lynn Longmire, a social worker with Thee Hospice. "She did that as well as establish the whole program in general."

For each volunteer, Louther said 30 hours of training had to be provided, and different volunteers had to be prepared to take on different roles.

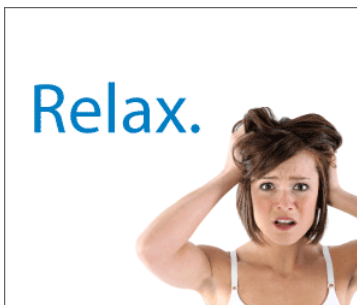
"There are those who want to do office work, those who want to go on visits, and those who actually want to work closely with the clients," she said.

Another important aspect Louther had to cover was the placement of a strong medical director for Thee Hospice.




"When we started hospice, David Knuth was the founding medical director," she said. "He had an understanding, as well, that there was a need for hospice in this area, and we've been very lucky to have him."

Louther also said she could not have started hospice without the assistance of Kim Landry, her sister Lorayne Brown-Shaw and her first registered nurse, Anne Olsta.

"I have the idea that you can't give good care unless you take good care of your staff," she said. "It's a known fact that water runs downhill, and whatever the attitude is of the person in



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charge is what's going to flow out to the patients.

"We opened in January of 1993, and since then we've served well over 2,000 customers."

No limits

Since its establishment, Louther said she has watched positive change occur at Thee Hospice every day.

"Thee Hospice has improved since 1993 because it has grown, they're doing even more, and their principles have gone back to simplicity," she said. "Watching the staff develop and seeing the patient and family responses were definitely the most rewarding aspects of my work." Louther was honored for her efforts on Nov. 15 — the day was officially declared "Marilyn Louther Day," and it was dedicated to her vision to establish Thee Hospice in Huntsville.

"It was a really nice gesture, but this is just icing on the cake for me," she said. "I'm at the end of my career and this is a very good highlight.

"I wouldn't call starting Thee Hospice a vision — essentially, I'm a pioneer and a creator."

Facing retirement, which she has officially set for Dec. 31, Louther remembers several specific things she was able to do for the patients under hospice care.

"We were able to arrange for an elderly couple to renew their wedding vows before the gentleman died," she said. "We arranged for a wedding to take place at his bedside.

"We also got a new stove for a man who was dying because he was afraid his wife would burn the house down with his old one."

Louther said the real beauty of hospice is being able to give patients exactly what they ask for.

"There's no end to the needs that can be met — it's wide open, and you can't do some of these things in a hospital setting," she said. "Sometimes, a spouse is able to just lie down by their loved one as they die. It may sound bad, but it's actually a beautiful way for it to happen.

"I've seen my own father be able to die comfortably, in his home, with his dog on his bed — that's what's possible."

After she retires, Louther plans to work in consulting with special needs children.

"I'll be playing with my ten grandchildren a lot more now," she said. "Still, I'm glad we did this. It was a lot of work, and a lot of fun, and we were able to do some really amazing things."



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