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## Alive Hospice nurse provides care as well as companionship

By Alexa Hinton, ahinton@nashvillecitypaper.com



Alive Hospice nurse Dottie Campbell chats with Elbert Blackmon during one of her weekly visits. *Josh Anderson/The City Paper*

Elbert Blackmon grumbles about using his cane. At 62, he's stubborn, and doesn't think it's a prop befitting a former college football player, model and actor.

"We have to get you one of those classy ones with a little flask or sword in it," Dottie Campbell tells him.

Campbell is Blackmon's Alive Hospice nurse, and one of only two people — the other being his daughter — who still can make him smile in his otherwise bleak world.

Blackmon, a retired marketing manager for the Tennessee Valley Authority, was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1987, and for more than a decade was able to successfully treat the disease. But in 2004, new tests revealed that the cancer was spreading to other parts of his body.

For two years, he tried chemo and radiation, and even an experimental drug treatment that wrecked his liver. In June of 2006, after his last radiation treatment, doctors told a weakened Blackmon that they had exhausted the possibilities for saving him and advised making preparations for his death.

This meant contacting Alive Hospice, a nonprofit agency that provides end-of-life care to people with life-threatening illnesses and life expectancies of six months or less.

"I am not a big smiler. I used to smile all the time, but now I don't feel I have a lot to smile about. It was really disappointing to have a doctor tell you there was nothing else they could do for you — kinda like they kick you to the curb. Goodbye," Blackmon said.

That's where Campbell comes in.

The role she plays in her patients' lives is to improve their quality of life in their final moments, and in that mission she wears many hats. She's a nurse who assuages pain through symptom management, a friend who raises spirits and a counselor who listens to problems and woes.

But most importantly she gives dignity and semblances of joy to a man like Blackmon.

"She's always there — 'Ready Dottie' — and always has that smile on her face. That's something to look forward to," said Blackmon. "She's more like a friend now, than a nurse, and I look forward to her visits."

### Two decades of care

Campbell recently celebrated her 20th anniversary with Alive Hospice — an honor and formidable feat in a profession fraught with death, loss and sadness.

Nonetheless, it's a job the nurse said she was born to do.

Campbell, a New York native, was in her 30s when she entered nursing school, where she met a professor who introduced her to the concept of hospice care.

"I was so impressed by that [professor] that when I went for my bachelor's degree and needed to do an independent study my senior year, I decided to do it with hospice. I'd go three days a week with this hospice in Long Island. I followed the nursing team and doctors and I just knew that was where I was supposed to be," Campbell said.

"Nurses tend to find their niche."

### Dottie comes Alive

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Campbell moved to Nashville with her family in the early '80s after her husband accepted a job with a local health care corporation.

While on her first drive out on the roads of her new city, she saw a sign for the Alive Hospice offices and wrote down their phone number vowing to call about job openings. Serendipitously, the next day she saw an ad in the newspaper by Alive Hospice looking to fill a full-time nursing position, and the job was hers.

When Campbell started with Alive Hospice, the agency had a total of 35 patients. Today, its team of nurses and other professionals care for 450 people each day, and Campbell, herself, has a caseload of between 10 and 12 patients.

She likens her visits to "medical coffee klatching."

"Coffee klatching is when you get together with a friend for coffee and you talk about everything. It must be a northern expression," Campbell said. "I come and we visit, and in the visit we mix in what's been going on in the past week since I was last here."

While she's chatting with her patients, sharing anecdotes of each other's lives, Campbell will check vital signs; inquire about existing physical problems, sleeping and eating patterns and new symptoms; and make visible assessments for things like the need for oxygen or a cane.

Even when a patient is doing well, Campbell still makes regular visits so that she develops a relationship with the family. This way, when the time comes for people to turn to Campbell, they are already comfortable with her.

It doesn't take long for Campbell to endear herself to people. With her short-cropped light blonde hair and red painted lips, she is witty, chatty, articulate and cheerful — all characteristics needed to be easily taken in and trusted by her patients.

"[When he first met Campbell] I had had a transfusion and a liver problem, so I had a couple of things I was working with, but the vibes were good initially just meeting her. You can meet someone and just know," Blackmon said. "I was like, 'She's pretty cool.' She's from New York and I am from New Jersey. The day she came she was dressed sharp, and I said, 'She's probably all right,' and subsequently that became the truth. She's more than all right. She's my lady."

**Care for the caregiver**

Campbell had the same effect on Blackmon's daughter, Charnette, who moved from New Jersey in 2006 to be with her father. As his sole caregiver, Charnette found an ally in the Alive Hospice nurse.

"She can relate and understand when I am trying to get him to do something or open up," Charnette said. "She'll speak for me. She becomes the 'rah rah' cheerleader when I can't do something or when I am upset. We have eye winking moments, like 'Yes! You did it!'"

"They double team me," Blackmon said.

Due largely to Campbell's care, Blackmon said he's met some personal goals for himself that few thought were possible. When he left the hospital in June of 2006, he and his daughter had plans to travel to Fiji and New Zealand that Christmas. By the end of December he had recovered from the energy-zapping radiation treatment and built up his strength enough to make the trip.

"I found so much joy when he got to go away last year cause I saw him go from being in that bed and really sad when I first met him and thinking, 'Oh, boy, I like a dreamer but I don't know about this' and then to see his world open back up and see them packed and ready and to see the pictures and know they had a really wonderful time, brings me joy," Campbell said.

Yet, some hurdles still remain. Blackmon, an avid football fan, has Titans season tickets, but he's too weak to climb to his higher-up seats and is forced to miss most games. Most days, a trip to the mailbox is all he can muster.

"It breaks my heart he can't go to the Titans games. If I could figure that out I would. It isn't always medical, what I do, and if I knew someone at the Titans I wouldn't think twice about calling them up," Campbell said.

"She just jumps in in terms of trying to help you no matter what it is. It's full service," Blackmon added.

**No good at goodbyes**

Being as close to families as she is, means Campbell witnesses a broad spectrum of human experience. She's seen reconciliations made just in time as well as grudges held too long, and a young father die from a brain tumor the day his wife gave birth to their child.

She gets choked up — not when talking about the goodbyes she's seen or had to say herself, but when she recalls the loving and giving ways she sees people taking care of each other.

One of her most poignant memories is of a child with cancer she was paged to see while on call.

"She had died, and she didn't have any hair because she had had chemo. She looked like a baby doll. She had a smile on her face and that's not something you often see," Campbell said. "Turns out the family surrounded her and held hands and sang to her as she died, and so when I walked in it was like seeing an angel."

"There are so many beautiful moments, so much love it's palpable when you are with people who are caring for each other."

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