

A Student Reflects on Their Time Volunteering for Hospice

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Abstract

Hospice is a special healthcare option for patients with terminal illnesses. With an interdisciplinary care team working together to meet patients' medical, emotional, and spiritual needs, hospice care can be provided in a number of different settings. As a hospice volunteer, I interact with members of the community and offer care and support at a time when it is most needed. This paper examines the impact of my involvement and participation as a hospice volunteer on the welfare of others and my personal development.

Hospice is one of medicine's oldest disciplines, and a lot of work is being done to educate the general public about its purpose and relevance (Duffin, 2014). Hospice strives to provide medical expertise and support to those who are coping with life-limiting illnesses that require specialized care. Hospice care focuses on relieving terminally ill patients' pain and symptoms while addressing their emotional and spiritual needs. In essence, hospice care prioritizes comfort and quality of life and involves an interdisciplinary team of physicians, nurses, social workers, religious clergy, and trained hospice volunteers (Lovelady & Sword, 2004). These professionals work together to address all aspects of a patient's health, and hospice volunteers are a key component of the hospice care plan. Understanding the importance and benefits of employing hospice volunteers is critical given that they do many things and fill a variety of roles. Direct patient volunteers spend time conversing with patients, playing their favorite games, discussing current events, and listening to their stories. Administrative volunteers are just as crucial: They assist with clerical tasks such as fundraising campaigns, support services management, and community outreach activities in addition to offering their time and talents to help patients and their families and friends. Becoming a hospice volunteer is one way of making a difference in the lives of others while practicing compassion and discovering personal skills.

From early childhood, my parents have always encouraged me to engage in meaningful activities that will enable me to grow, learn, and develop responsibility. When I attended high

school, I was first introduced to the Latin phrase *cura personalis*, which translates to "care of the whole person" (Quick, 2020). This Catholic, Jesuit concept serves as a guiding principle in what I do and how I interact with others. My Jesuit education through high school and university has taught me the importance of volunteering for personal leadership. I became a hospice volunteer because I wanted to offer emotional care and companionship to patients approaching the ends of their lives (Claxton-Oldfield, 2015). With no prior hospice care experience, I envisioned dying to be a journey and believed that I could serve to make the voyage comfortable and pleasant. Volunteering for hospice is about relationship building and providing psychological support to patients and their loved ones. The encounters involve communicating and connecting with people of various ages from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds on various subjects. My focus as a hospice volunteer is to foster patients' dignity and improve the well-being of their mind and spirit. I am committed to connecting with my patients, despite their limitations, to make a difference in the remainder of their lives.

A Jesuit university education transforms students: It prepares them for work that benefits the common good while helping them discover their vocation in life and, in the long term, develop as human beings (Quinn, 2016). My participation in a hospice organization was driven by both my university studies and my desire to pursue a career in medicine. My university promotes the scholarship of civic engagement through a variety of academic disciplines. I am taught to use my

knowledge to better the lives of others, to learn from experience, and to take responsibility for my education. As a biology/premed student and a member of the university's health professions organization (HPO), I have come to understand the value that medical schools place on direct patient interaction and community service. The HPO provides information, support, and networking opportunities to students interested in health care careers, and my HPO mentors encouraged me to engage in an elective community-based learning (CBL) project. The university's Office of Community-Based Learning has collaborated with community-based organizations to identify projects that promote mutually beneficial relationships between the university and the wider community. From the approximately 50 CBL initiatives provided, the HPO suggested that I choose an organization and population consistent with and relevant to my interests. My time as a hospice volunteer displays my commitment to helping others and learning more about health care delivery and my dedication to improving my leadership and self-management skills.

Creativity, positivity, and patience are among the skills I use to develop trusting ties and lasting memories with my hospice patients and their loved ones. I am able to apply the soft skills I have gained in the classroom when working in the community. In my *Eloquentia Perfecta* Writing class, for example, I used creativity in drafting and reworking my writing to articulate my thoughts better. A story about Socrates in my philosophy class taught me that positivity can be found by changing the way I think about a situation and that patience and positivity are the means to a content life. As a hospice volunteer, my attention is focused on the needs of others by assisting behind the scenes or by simply being present with patients in their homes, assisted living centers, nursing homes, and other familiar settings. My primary goal is to offer empathy, support, and companionship to both patients and their loved ones during their difficult time, and my responsibilities change depending on patients' needs. A significant portion of my time is spent socializing with patients and creating a sense of normalcy. My duties as a hospice volunteer include helping nursing home patients with arts and crafts activities to enhance their cognitive functioning and taking hot chocolate and cookies to an assisted care facility to cheer up the residents. In addition, I have conducted interviews with family members to prepare a biography and derived and executed a fundraising plan for a very

special patient's dream vacation in partnership with the hospice organization.

My time as a hospice volunteer has taught me many things, but I want to focus on the three most important takeaways. First, listening is an active process that requires you to engage with your patients and their families and friends. You give them your undivided attention and let them speak without interrupting. There is a lot to be learned from others. The fear of losing someone is one of the most terrifying thoughts that anyone can have. In one memorable case, I honored a loved one's memory by listening to family members and developing a biography to ensure that their memories will last a lifetime. Second, resilience is a learnable skill. The ability to bounce back and adapt when faced with challenges—the loss of a loved one or patient, tragedy, and/or personal crisis—can be taught. Developing resilience requires experiencing discomfort and emotional distress. Resilience won't make the problem go away, but by acquiring resilience, you will have the tenacity to move forward. Seeing a patient succumb to a terminal illness has given me the capacity to put my difficulties into context. I don't get discouraged if I do poorly on one examination, for instance, since I can always apply myself to do better on the next. Lastly, time management is a behavior that is based on your ability to manage your time well. Managing time requires developing a plan, prioritizing your actions, and reflecting on your work. A well-organized life will have time for the activities that are most important to you. In order to volunteer for hospice, I set up a schedule so that I can get everything done—complete my coursework, engage in a university faculty-student research program, serve as an active member of and volunteer for the area ambulance association, assist at a community food pantry, spend time with my family and friends, and do things that I enjoy.

Becoming a hospice volunteer is one of the most impactful decisions I have made in my life, particularly in my pursuit of a career in medicine. I have gained a greater understanding of the holistic approach to patient care, solidified my desire to become a physician, and learned how to be a better person. My work with hospice has provided me with more gratification than any other community activity I have engaged in thus far. In my roles as a direct patient and administrative hospice volunteer, I have positively affected the patients I cared for, their families and friends, and the hospice team. In addition, volunteering for hospice has provided me with experiences and relationships

that have influenced my growth as a student and, more importantly, as a person. My CBL project integrated learning and mentorship through a community partnership and critical reflection. The opportunity provided me with greater self-knowledge, enhanced interpersonal and leadership skills, increased cultural awareness, and a greater motivation to learn. Consequently, I can contribute more fully to my community in my pursuit of a career in medicine, and more significantly, in life.

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About the Author

At the time of writing this article, Myah York was an undergraduate student at the University of Scranton. She graduated *magna cum laude* from the university in May 2022 with a bachelor's degree in biology. Myah is currently applying to medical school to pursue a career as a physician.