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ANNUAL *fund* 2023



ELEVATING QUALITY OF LIFE

As Robert Small happily floated on his back in the pool at the Brennity at Vero Beach Senior Living facility, he could hardly believe his good fortune. Only a few months prior, when he was diagnosed with late-stage esophageal cancer, he would have been too weak for such a simple pleasure. But thanks to a multi-pronged approach to hospice care by VNA, his wish came true.

But it almost didn't. When Robert was initially diagnosed with cancer, he hoped chemotherapy and radiation might work for him. But after several conversations with his doctors who uniformly advised hospice, he, with the support of his wife, Sheila, accepted reality. "The question came down to, if you have some kind of limited period to live, do you want to spend half of it getting treatments?" says Robert.

Soon a team of VNA Hospice caregivers began visiting him at home: a music therapist, a social worker, a nurse and an aide who bathes him twice a week. He enjoys his music therapist, Andrea Ferguson. “The first time she came to my house, I ended up singing along to “Country Road,” one of my favorites,” says Robert, who worked as an attorney in Syracuse, New York, before retiring to Vero Beach.

Another “favorite” of Robert’s is his social worker, Haley Stone, who he confides in. “It’s easy to fall into feeling sorry for yourself and being depressed and so forth when you get this type of a diagnosis,” says Robert. “(But) it is unbelievable to me how much working with Haley, talking about problems and concerns and so forth, can really make you feel good.”

One of his main concerns was his wife Sheila, a retired librarian and school administrator, and his primary caregiver. “She consistently fretted over me,” says Robert. He wanted to give her a break and Haley suggested Respite Care at VNA Hospice House, a unique service that VNA offers home hospice patients once a month for five days. The goal is to provide the primary caregiver, like Sheila, time to refuel.

Robert agreed but was nervous. “I thought it would be a funereal atmosphere, boy was I wrong. It was very comfortable, like being in a fine hotel. But that isn’t the most important thing, the most important thing was that the people at Hospice House were so upbeat and considerate. It really gives you a big lift,” he says.

Some highlights from his week included delicious meals served by a professional in-house chef. “I can’t overlook the chef who is terrific,” recalls Robert. In addition, he was pampered with numerous baths, more music therapy and great conversations

with round-the-clock caregivers. “The people are all cheerful. I talked to one of them and said how do you do it? And the nurse said, ‘This is what we want to do, we want to take care of people, so it’s no big sacrifice. And to see someone like you who is really getting a lot of good from it is a reward,’ and I like that.”

There was one caregiver, a CNA, who really surprised him with his visit, VNA CEO Lundy Fields. “I was sort of astonished he came, but we had nice conversations and he’s very enjoyable and not the least bit stuffy,” says Robert.

Lundy enjoyed the meeting as well. “Robert is a lovely man with an incredible zest for life,” says VNA’s CEO.

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Robert’s most treasured visitor was Sheila, who also took the week to relax as Robert had hoped. “I caught up on my sleep and recharged my batteries while he was there,” she says. “I had a haircut and pedicure and I had lunch with a friend, and I went to Chico’s to window shop.”

After Robert returned home, his overall health improved, including his strength. He felt well enough to swim in his private pool, but Sheila was concerned he might fall, so he didn’t. While he understood his wife’s concerns, he was disappointed and mentioned this in passing to Haley. Immediately, she began to formulate a plan. “I knew that our team could make that happen for him,” says Haley. That afternoon she contacted the volunteer team, who jumped into action and organized an afternoon for Robert at the Brennity which has a saltwater pool with a chairlift that safely lowers people



into the water. The excursion would be funded by donations procured for Project Wish, a VNA & Hospice Foundation supported program that grants end-of-life wishes for hospice patients.

The afternoon was a huge success. Once Robert was safely in the water, he spent the remainder of the time afloat with Kim Smith's supportive arm under his back. "I wanted to go off on my own, but Kim wanted to be there just in case," he says with a twinkle in his eyes. "And the day was fabulous."

Kim couldn't agree more. "It was by far the most humbling and rewarding experience I could have ever been a part of," she says. And the person who got the whole ball rolling in the first place, Haley, concurs. "It was a such an honor to be a part of it," she says, adding, "I explained to Mr. Small that hospice is more than dying, it's also about living and trying to make remaining moments as meaningful and joyful as possible. I feel like we were able to help him accomplish this in some small way."

As far as Robert's concerned, there's no doubt that she and her team did. "I've heard of many organizations that are set up to do good, but there are only a few that actually do good, and VNA and Hospice are absolutely true to their word. They do exactly what they say which is to make you enjoy each and every day," says Robert.

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