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Hospice of Santa Barbara Volunteer Jeanne West Brings Peace, Dignity to the Dying

By Suzanne Farwell for the Santa Barbara Foundation | Published on 07.14.2014 3:28 p.m.

Jeanne West experienced two tragedies in her life. She accepted them courageously and later decided to share what she learned by volunteering with **Hospice of Santa Barbara**.



Jeanne West

In 1974, West's husband was diagnosed with metastatic cancer. A registered nurse, she decided to care for him herself. It was a difficult and painful experience. There was no hospice at the time and little help available, but West was determined to provide her

husband with loving, compassionate care, in spite of the uncertainty, pain and the difficulty of letting go.

After her husband's death in 1975, West traveled to England in 1977 to study with Dame Cicely Saunders, founder of the first modern hospice, who was responsible for establishing the field of palliative care. She introduced effective pain management and insisted that dying people receive dignity, compassion and respect.

West absorbed everything she could and returned to the United States ready to work with the dying. Then living in Fresno, she educated the community about the benefits of hospice care.

West moved to Santa Barbara in 1983 and established a home care agency, which connected people to hospice care. She also continued formal U.S. training in hospice care and signed up to volunteer for Hospice of Santa Barbara.

Tragedy struck again in 2006 when her second husband was diagnosed with Lewy-Body Dementia, for which there is no cure. West gave up her job to care for him full-time. She says she does not regret one moment of his last three years. This time, she knew more and was able to arrange hospice for him for the last three months of his life, enabling West to care for her husband at home. She says she had time to express the gratitude we are often too busy to share and to forgive old wounds. She has since helped three women in Santa Barbara whose husbands were dying from dementia-related illnesses.

West continues to add to her education. Helping a patient die peacefully involves helping with their psychological and spiritual pain, regrets and the quest for meaning.

West underwent spiritual care training, learning to be "wholly present" for the patient, regardless of religious affiliation. She acquired significant listening skills, which at times involve sitting, being aware and caring, but staying silent, sometimes for hours. She also listens to family members who are often reluctant to "let go" of their loved one.

Every Saturday, West sits with the dying. She rarely skips a visit, only missing a few Saturdays in the last year. She likes to think of "giving of herself" as a gift that is returned by making a difference during a patient's final days. It is a profound experience.

A vivacious woman full of joie de vivre, West possesses an inner core of strength. She is passionate about giving back and is so impressed with Hospice of Santa Barbara, which offers its services without cost, that she has included the organization in her will.

In the meantime, she is devoted to helping people achieve what everyone wants — a peaceful death.

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Volunteers enrich all our lives.

Do you know a volunteer who has made a significant impact on the Santa Barbara community? You can nominate that person to be the next man or woman of the year! Just fill out a simple nomination form [online by clicking here](#). Nominations are open until Aug. 26. The awards are sponsored by the [Santa Barbara Foundation](#) and [Noozhawk](#).

— *Suzanne Farwell represents the [Santa Barbara Foundation](#).*