

Raise awareness about end-of-life care

Visiting Nurse Service and Hospice of Suffolk provides families with in-home, inpatient care

By David Ambro

For people familiar with hospice, it can rekindle tears and tug at your heartstrings, and for those unfamiliar with this crucial end-of-life care, now is an important time to become more aware of the services that are offered.

November is National Hospice and Palliative Care Awareness Month and no place is that more important than at the Visiting Nurse Service and Hospice of Suffolk (VNSHS) at 101 Laurel Road in East Northport. The eight-bed facility opened in 2004, this month its 17th year anniversary. It is the first freestanding inpatient hospice in New York State, used as a national model for others. It is accessible to patients near and far, including out-of-state who want end-of-life care near their families on Long Island. And next year, VNSHS, founded in 1952, will be celebrating its 70th anniversary, the first home nurse service in Suffolk County.

During an interview at the hospice house Monday, November 15, Director of Patient Services Connie Alexander and Social Work Supervisor Mary Denning talked about the importance of raising awareness about hospice services.

"Hospice is not a term that is commonplace in people's conversations or in their homes until somebody is diagnosed with a terminal illness that is untreatable. There is a stigma to it," Ms. Alexander said.

"It's a very negative stigma, plus we are not very open to talking about death and dying in this society. We are very uncomfortable with it, we don't want to deal with it, and we don't want to talk about it," Ms. Denning added. "So I think the awareness piece is huge. If you think about it, the only guarantee in life is that we are going to die and certainly we should be able to talk about how hospice facilitates that with comfort."

To be referred for hospice a doctor must determine a patient is not going to live for more than six months if the terminal illness takes its natural course, no further curative measures can be tried, and palliative care is called for.

"A lot of time that is met with doom and gloom and a lot of people don't know there are options to live with quality



A family meeting room at Hospice House on Laurel Road in East Northport.

for the remaining time that they have. That's really where hospice comes into play," Ms. Denning. "We can make you comfortable when there is time and hopefully you can do some of the things you wish to do and a gift of terminal illness is that there is time. We don't know how much but, a lot can be done with that time so this is an important topic to discuss and accept."

In her formative days at the Visiting Nurse Service Hospice House, Ms. Denning had a defining experience that shaped her perspective about hospice. She and a nurse were checking on the care of a patient, and he looked at Ms. Denning and waved a finger across the room at his family. "This is not about me. I have the easy part," he said. "It's them I'm worried about. Go ask them if they're okay."

"I thought he was absolutely right. It really shaped how I now go in with a nurse and let her deal with the patient and I deal with their family so nobody ever feels neglected," she said. "It is about working with them as intimately as possible to get them to a point where they leave this journey as unscathed as possible."

"We really want everyone to feel like they are at home. We call it a hospice house because that is really what

our intent is, to make it your home—your home away from home," Ms. Alexander said.

For a facility treating the terminally ill, the coronavirus (COVID-19) was a trying time at the hospice house. Ms. Denning said some beds would turn over two or three times in a day. Four of the eight rooms in the facility were retrofitted with special negative-pressure air exchange systems to accommodate COVID patients without impacting the other patients in the facility.

By the time COVID patients reached the hospice house they passed away quickly. "It was a very emotional and very scary time for the people in the community and a very emotional and scary time for the staff members," Ms. Alexander said. "You're a nurse, so of course you are a health care professional who knows how to take those precautions. But the idea that you are at such a high risk at any moment is terrifying. So we are really lucky our staff stepped it up and continued to work here despite the risk of becoming infected themselves."

"COVID was definitely difficult. You had people who were running 5ks and a week and a half later they are laying in one of our rooms,"

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Sandra Orologio (right) with her mom, Mary Lemmo.

Forever grateful to Hospice House

By David Ambro

When Sandra Orologio, of Smithtown, shares her story about the Visiting Nurse Service and Hospice House in East Northport it is testimonial the facility has become known for, a heart-wrenching story about the loss of a loved one tempered by the homespun support of the Hospice House staff.

During an interview this week, on the occasion of National Hospice and Palliative Care Awareness Month, Ms. Orologio said the Hospice House staff helped her through one of the most difficult experiences of her life in a way that she will never forget.

"It's incredible. It's small and so personal and it just has a great vibe. For something that is not a great circumstance, it just has a really great vibe," Ms. Orologio said. "I can't say enough about it. I would not have fared as well as I did had it not been for that support."

In May 2019 her mother, Mary Lemmo, was diagnosed with stage-four lung cancer and moved from Naples, Florida into Ms. Orologio's Smithtown home so her daughter could help care for her. Two months later, Ms. Orologio was diagnosed with breast cancer.

In the early stages, nurses from the Visiting Nurse Service and Hospice House came to her Smithtown home to care for her mother while she dealt with her breast cancer care. "It was amazing. They really did an unbelievable job. It was one thing that my mother had lung cancer and they took excellent care of her, and I think when they found out what happened with me they stepped it up even more," Ms. Orologio said. "They were just so supportive, from the counselors to the nurses... I don't know if Bruce is still there, but he was an absolute sweetheart," she said. "They just made everything so much easier. My family and my siblings were able to visit with my mother and I didn't have all that pressure to take care of her. Although she was living with me, they took a lot of the burden off of me."

Ms. Orologio said when it came time for in-patient hospice for her mother, the Visiting Nurse Service Hospice House in East Northport came highly recommended by several people she knows. Ms. Orologio said her mother entered the East Northport Hospice House but then her condition improved and she came back home. "I didn't know I had breast cancer at that point, and it was just so serendipitous how it all worked out," she said. "It was a

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Hospice helps families with end of life care

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Ms. Denning added, "So that was a difficult process."

Despite the challenges COVID presented, the hospice house staff strived to uphold its mantra of providing a homelike setting for families. In one instance in August 2020 they staged a wedding in the memorial garden so a patient could participate. "How awesome is that?" Ms. Denning asked.

Ms. Alexander said it was a beautiful event arranged by Ms. Denning, Hospice House Volunteer Coordinator Bonnie Gruber, and team assistant Tracey Ryan. "It was awesome. It was beautiful," she said.

"And it was perfectly timed because the patient passed the next day," Ms. Denning added.

Also during COVID an elderly man came to the hospice house from an assisted living facility and they made arrangements for his grandchildren to serenade him through the windows.

"It was very hard during COVID because we wanted these patients to have their families at their bedside. There was such a balance that had to be made with the protection of the staff and the other patients," Ms. Alexander said, adding that by keeping the staff safe the facility never closed during COVID and instead underwent safety enhancements that makes it better equipped for the future.

As for the present, Ms. Alexander knocked on the wooden table in front of her. "We're in a pretty good place. We have not had a COVID patient in quite some time," she said, adding that there have been some COVID patients at home in the field sporadically but that they have recovered. "But we haven't had any terminal COVID patients in quite some time now and we're hoping it stays that way."

In summation about operating a hospice house through a global pandemic, Ms. Alexander said it was the ultimate learning experience. "When you go through an experience like COVID you learn a whole heck of a lot," she said. "We learned what it is like to be in a pandemic. It is unprecedented. No one I know who is still alive has been alive during a plague or a pandemic like this. It was uncharted waters for us. But we survived it."

In addition to raising awareness in the community about hospice care, Ms. Denning said National Hospice and Palliative Care Awareness Month has a tendency to raise morale among the staff. "When you get a glimpse at human suffering the way we see people come in here, we get a sense of relief when someone has a comfortable death and if you are not in this field of work it is hard to hear that," she said. "That for us is what makes this all worthwhile."

The operation of the hospice house is not financially self-sustaining from patient coverage and relies on donations to sustain its budget. To donate, go to the VNSHHS website, visitingnurseservice.org, call the office at 505 Main Street in Northport Village at 631-261-7200, or shop at its thrift shop at 345 Main Street in Huntington.

In addition to its hospice program,

the Visiting Nurse Service offers a respite program at the hospice house, where families can bring terminally ill patients for five days to get a break from home care. "The sole purpose of it is caregiver burnout," Ms. Alexander said, adding that it is for patients who are already in a hospice program.

Ms. Denning said she speaks to family members with a home hospice situation and can tell sometimes from the tone of their voice that they are candidates for the respite program. She said many times these are people catapulted into caregiving and they

are unfamiliar with how difficult it can be. She said the hospice house tries to help guide them through that experience.

During National Hospice and Palliative Care Awareness Month, hospice and palliative care programs across the country are reaching out to raise awareness. "Every year, nearly 1.4 million people living with a life-limiting illness receive care from hospices in this country," National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization President and Chief Executive Officer Edo Banach said.

"These highly trained professionals ensure that patients and families find dignity, respect and love during life's most difficult journey."

Hospice and palliative care programs provide pain management, symptom control, psychosocial support and spiritual care to patients and their families when a cure is not possible. These programs combine the highest level of quality medical care with the emotional and spiritual support that families need most when facing a serious illness or the end of life.

Wife gives back in gratitude for husband's care

By David Ambro

It's been a year since Therese Murphy, of Greenlawn, lost her husband Tom to lung cancer but it still brings tears to her eyes to share the story.

Although bereaved at the loss of her beloved husband, Ms. Murphy has found some solace at having become part of the family at Visiting Nurse Service and Hospice of Suffolk (VNSHS) at 101 Laurel Avenue in East Northport where her husband died from lung cancer after a brief stay last year. Ms. Murphy was so moved by the care her husband received and treatment her family experienced at Hospice House that she now volunteers there and at the VNSHS community thrift shop at 345 Main Street in Huntington.

Ms. Murphy is a retired registered nurse from Huntington Hospital, where she worked for more than 34 years. Her husband battled lung cancer for two years, and they planned to do hospice at home. When his condition didn't allow it, though, he was transferred to Hospice House to better manage his pain and keep him safer and more content through the end of his life. He passed two days after he was admitted.

Ms. Murphy said she knew about Hospice House in East Northport but never had any personal experience with the facility until her husband was taken there. "I certainly didn't know



The East Northport Hospice House is a special place for families in difficult times.

about the volunteer program but after Tom passed there I decided I had to do something to give back," she said. "The experience was so unique and so powerful for me that I had to do something in return."

As a long-time hospital nurse, Ms. Murphy said she thought she knew what dying was like for a family through the experiences of her patients. "But when it's your husband, somebody you love so much, it's just so different and so special," she said, and cried. "The staff at Hospice House made it everything for me."

"I was able to stay with him night and day and just watch the care that they gave and the dignity they provide to their patients," Ms. Murphy said.

"It was just so moving that I feel so blessed right now to be there as a volunteer."

As a Hospice House volunteer at the thrift shop, Ms. Murphy said she retired from health care and has found a new career in retail. She said that as a nurse she loved working with people and she now finds that same reward as a volunteer. She volunteers in the beginning of the week at the thrift shop and at the end of the week at Hospice House.

"I feel that I have gotten the best possible volunteer experience thanks to Visiting Nurse Service and I'm so delighted they offer a volunteer program like they do," Ms.

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Getting out the word about how hospice helps

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little hairy and I couldn't have done it without the support of that particular house and all of the nurses and social workers—they were all incredible and they made it easier."

Her mother came out of hospice and lived with her for several months while Ms. Orologio was treated for breast cancer. She is now in remission and feels fine and her mother was there to see her through it. Soon after her prognosis had improved, around Mother's Day 2020, her mother went back into the hospice house and she died May 11, 2020.

"She said 'okay, you can call hospice house now. I'm ready,'" Ms. Orologio said. "I made the call, they picked her up, and I think she passed within five to six days.

About National Hospice and Palliative Care Awareness Month, Ms. Orologio said she just learned there is such a thing. She is a teacher and is familiar with Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Autism Awareness Month, etc. She added, though, that it is important that people become aware of hospice care.

"Word has to get out and that's why I agreed to share my story," she said. "We need more of this. Based on my experience with friends whose parents haven't been doing well and having to bring in a nurse, and worrying about how to pay for it, and all of that, I think a lot of people don't understand they can go to hospice."

She said that when she talks to some of her friends about hospice, they can become uncomfortable with

it and they don't think their loved ones are ready for it. She tells them that it is wonderful around-the-clock care that gives them a positive end-of-life quality of care. "It is such a personal thing but I think it is great that they are trying to bring some form of awareness to it."

"A lot of people don't even know that particular hospice house is even there," she said.

Moving forward Ms. Orologio, a physical education teacher, said in terms of fundraisers and support she intends to help the hospice house as much as she can with its fundraisers and events. To donate, go to visitingnurseservice.org, call the office at 631-261-7200, or shop at its thrift shop at 345 Main Street in Huntington.

Long Island hearings next week on redistricting

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of Smithtown over the interests of Three Village. He said that inequity can be eliminated by putting all of Three Village into the First Senate District.

On Long Island under the Democratic plan, the congressional districts would change only slightly, the Third Congressional District represented by Democratic Congressman Thomas Suozzi (D-Glen Cove) losing a small area of Kings Park and sections of Queens taking in a large area of central Nassau County. The First Congressional District represented by Congressman Lee Zeldin (R-Shirley), who is running for

governor rather than seek re-election, would take in more of Kings Park and extended into Brentwood and include less of Lake Grove. And the Second Congressional District on the South Shore represented by Republican Andrew Garbarino (R-Sayville), will be moved north to take in more of central Nassau and west Hempstead.

Under the Republican plan the congressional district changes are far more significant. The Third Congressional District would move deep into Suffolk County, taking in all of Smithtown and Brookhaven out to Rocky Point, Coram and Medford and the southern boundary of the district would be moved north considerably in

eliminating Democratic strongholds of Dix Hills, South Huntington, Hicksville and Plainview from the district.

The First Congressional District would also be changed significantly, moved east along the south shore from Patchogue to West Babylon and into West Islip, Deer Park and Brentwood, including Rep. Zeldin and Rep. Garbarino in the same district.

As for the State Senate Districts, the Democratic plan includes only minor adjustments of the boundaries, while the Republican plan calls for more significant changes. The Republican plan includes State Senators James Gaughran (D-Northport) and Mario Mattira (R-St. James) in the same

district, which will span from Centerport east to Port Jefferson Station. There is also a vast difference in the southern boundary of the Second District represented by Mr. Mattira and the Fifth District represented by Mr. Gaughran.

Interactive district maps are available on the commission website. The maps, which are outlined street-by-street, are also able to be downloaded.

For additional information about the hearing or the redistricting plan maps, contact commission Executive Director Karen Blatt at blattk@nyirc.gov or co-executive director Douglas Breakell at breakell@nyirc.gov.

Town Board antes up to save community theaters

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households, small businesses, impacted industries, and the public sector; replace lost public sector revenue, using this funding to provide government services to the extent of the reduction in revenue experienced due to the pandemic, provide premium pay for essential workers, offering additional support to those

who have and will bear the greatest health risks because of their service in critical infrastructure sectors, and invest in water, sewer, and broadband infrastructure, making necessary investments to improve access to clean drinking water, support vital wastewater and stormwater infrastructure, and to expand access to broadband internet.

"Within these overall categories, recipients have broad flexibility to decide how best to use this funding to meet the needs of their communities," according to the treasury.

In the meantime, Mr. Wehrheim has included a \$60,000 annual allocation in the town budget for Celebrate St. James to help maintain the Calderone Theater at 176 Second Street in St. James. The Calderone Theater is owned by Natalie Weinstein, the founder of Celebrate St. James who is trying to sell the theater to the organization for \$1 million and to raise about \$1 million for the renovation of the building.

Mr. Wehrheim said the annual

\$60,000 from the town will be used to help Celebrate St. James remain in the Calderone Theater while it contemplated acquiring the building from Ms. Weinstein. He said the ARPA money is also being used this year and next year for Celebrate St. James.

"We are allocating \$60,000 a year to keep them alive while they are in the process of finding out what they are doing," Mr. Wehrheim said. "We think it is well worthwhile to keep that theater in St. James as well because we are trying to turn it into a cultural arts business district and we think the theater should remain there and could be put to good public use."

Raising awareness for hospice programs

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Murphy said. "They're a phenomenal organization. I cannot say enough about them."

Ms. Murphy shared her experience on the occasion of National Hospice and Palliative Care Awareness Month, which she said is important to help people better understand what this type of service means and how it can help a family through such a difficult time.

"I have found in my experience that the one problem is the language that we use," Ms. Murphy said. "People talk to patients and families about palliative care and they don't even know what that means. They need to say comfort care and they need to explain that it is not the equivalent of a mercy killing."

"What it does is give the patient the opportunity to have his pain managed, to have his needs met by people who are skilled and do nothing but that to give them the dignity they need at the end of life and to help them with

the process of transitioning from life into death," Ms. Murphy said. "It is a process and people go through it in their own way but it is really important to know that you can bring your patient to a hospital or an inpatient setting like this where they're skilled and they do nothing but that and they make the experience as important as it can be for the patient and for the family."

As important as the hospice program, Ms. Murphy said the after death bereavement program was also critical for her. She said that for 13 months she was contacted by the hospice house staff to see how she was doing. The coronavirus (COVID-19) prevented her from participating in bereavement groups, but she said the outreach by the staff was tremendously helpful.

"They made themselves available for me anytime for 13 months," she said. "They don't forget about you and that does not happen in the regular setting."

Veterans in spotlight at Smithtown Theater

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document and preserve the stories of patriotism, camaraderie and strength of our brave hometown heroes, for future generations. But it has become so much more," Supervisor Wehrheim said. "This is our way of saying 'thank you for your service' to our local heroes... for we owe them everything."

During an interview Tuesday Supervisor Wehrheim commended Ms. Garguilo for her work on the documentary. He said she was wrapping up some of the final interviews for the movie Tuesday. He said the documentary is a complete portfolio of veterans from World War II through every single war the United States has engaged in ever since.

"We're real proud of this," Mr.

Wehrheim said. "We did interviews with all of those veterans and to honor them we put together a movie reel of all of those interviews."

The supervisor said the premiere is going to be a great night that he is looking forward to. "The veterans are going to love it," he said. "We have a number of World War II vets that we included, Korean War vets, Vietnam War vets. It is really well put together and I think it is really great to honor the veterans of Smithtown this way and it should be a great night at the theater."

After the premiere, Supervisor Wehrheim said the documentary will be made available on the town website and social media platforms to be downloadable.

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