

Memory Maker Project – The Memory Box: *An Experience with a Hospice Patient*

Juneau, if you could fill a Memory Box for your loved ones, what would you put in it? One of the ways we can support patients and families is offering to help them find a creative outlet to share their stories and memories through pictures, video, and mementos from activities with loved ones.

A Hospice patient, *Betty had two children, ages 12 and 14. She requested the help of our Hospice team to coordinate activities she could complete with her kids so they would have some good memories during a difficult period in their lives. Art projects can often be a fun activity that everyone can participate in, but a conversation with the young siblings helped Betty realize they first wanted to focus on their favorite foods she used to make for them when she was well.

Hospice Volunteer Mary and Chaplain Claire worked together to secure use of the kitchen and fellowship hall of a local church. Here the family, with the help of Claire and Mary, could prepare and eat some meals together. The kids were excited to try their hand at making the simple recipes they had chosen, and Betty was able to instruct them and help mix the ingredients. Claire took photos every step of the way, and Mary documented the recipes, and the special moments created at each dinner. Claire reached out to a seamstress friend who was kind enough to create three beautiful aprons so they could all be a cooking team. The kids sliced and diced and cooked, helped set a table with flowers and tablecloth, and then enjoyed the feasts together with Betty.

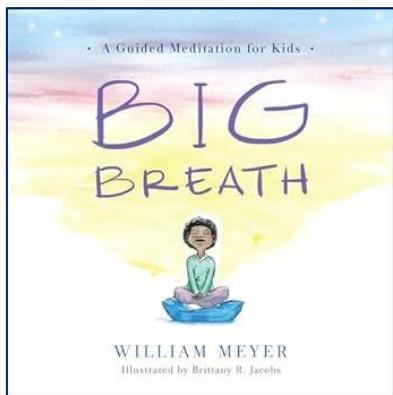
Mary noted, “The kids were very engaged in these evenings. I think they were enjoyable for the whole family and very satisfying for Betty to be able to instruct and work alongside the kids, see them gaining confidence in the skills they were learning, and to see that the kids wanted to know how to prepare her recipes that were part of their childhood. As a hospice volunteer, it was satisfying to be able to help the family create lasting memories.”

Claire and Mary edited and organized the photos and typed up the recipes before sending them to the Hospice Volunteer Coordinator to perform her computer magic to create recipes and memory books for the family.



From Left to Right: Betty, one of her children and Volunteer Mary making a full-of-flavor fruit salad.

As Betty's breathing became more labored, and the ability to cook meals was now limited, she turned her thoughts to other memory box ideas. Betty learned the calming effects of meditation and wanted her children to have that skill. She really liked the



book, "Big Breath: A Guided Meditation for Kids" by William Meyer. Mary and Claire recorded her narrating the book to create a read-along for the kids. After she died, volunteer Tom was able to edit the audio and pair it with a video of the book pages being turned. A copy of the book, along with the video were added to the memory box that was created for the kids. "Beyond learning new technical skills, I spent hours listening to Betty's voice and feeling her love for her children," noted Tom. "Knowing that her children will have a recording of their mother's voice made it a rewarding addition to the Memory Maker Project."

The hospice team was able to include the couple who were adopting Betty's kids in the final evening with the family. There was laughter as Betty and her daughter piled on the whipped cream over the fresh strawberries. They also enjoyed rock painting and shared a meal. Photos to remember that moment were included in the recipe and activity book that Betty was able to review and edit before it was printed. And, touchingly, Betty asked that her apron be given to the woman who was adopting her children.

Some other items included in the memory box were two candles, one for each child, that Betty wanted her kids to light at Christmas or other times when they wanted to remember her. Mary wrote out and included in the box, instructions Betty had told her and what she had in mind for the candles left for the kids. Betty's hope was that lighting the candles would help them recall their memories of her and feel her love and continuing presence in their lives.

The memory box, with the completed book of photos and recipes the recording and video of the meditation book, a copy of the book, candles, aprons, and a cookie cutter from one of their recipe nights, were given to the kids after their mom's memorial service. The kids spent time looking through the items and seemed very glad to have them.

Our team learned a lot from the experience with this patient. Tom remarked that a memory box is a creative way to help families grieve and would encourage others to explore the idea. Another of our team shared, "Don't be pressured to put things you do not want in your memory box. This box is for you. Do not feel obligated to save pictures or items that would cause painful memories for you or your loved ones."

The experience of working with the hospice team to help create this memory box will be useful in Mary's volunteer work with future hospice patients. "It helped me understand the value of collaborating with a patient and their family to create a memory box or

other tangible means of sharing and preserving memories and stories", noted Mary. "Determining an approach that will be most meaningful to them will be my focus."

In the case of Betty and her family, the memory-making experiences enabled staff to develop a rapport with the kids and the adoptive parents. That made it easier for the family to take advantage of our bereavement support services which offer 13 months of outreach after the death of a loved one who had been in hospice care.

You don't need to be under Hospice care to start your memory box! Having conversations with loved ones about what they would like to do is valuable.

Now that you have a better idea of what you can do, what would you put in a memory box for your loved ones to remember you?

Author: Claire Richardson, MA – Hospice Chaplain

**Patient name changed to maintain confidentiality.*