

Photos provided by OhioHealth Hospice

MARK MITERA

Hospice chaplain provides music and a listening ear to those facing life's end.

By Fred Kight

You're sitting with someone who's dying – what do you do? What do you say?

For Mark Mitera, the answers, while never easy, are less difficult. Spending time with patients in their last days of life is his job.

Mitera works for OhioHealth Hospice as a chaplain. He joined the staff just this past summer.

"I wouldn't be happier doing anything else," he said.

Mitera, 58, has been a chaplain for almost 23 years. Before joining the hospice team, he served more than 26 years on active duty – six in the Air Force and 20 in the Army – and another seven years in the Army Reserves.

He said he became a chaplain because of his love for people who serve in the military and his desire to help them on their spiritual journey.

"Following my military retirement, I wasn't ready to be fully retired for the rest of my life, and I had been thinking about starting a new career as a civilian chaplain in some capacity," Mitera explained. "We (he and his wife) already owned a home in Athens...and that's the

place where we want to spend our remaining days in this life."

OhioHealth Hospice is designed to help people make the most of every minute when end-of-life care is needed. Mitera and other professionals provide support to patients in their homes, nursing homes and assisted living centers.

Mitera's father passed away while in hospice care "and since I had worked in the military as a hospital chaplain for a while, I had thought about becoming involved in hospice work so I could help people through difficult times," he said.

"Having experienced hospice with my dad helped me to realize that I could possibly do a lot of good in this area, and I had the knowledge and skills needed to help hospice patients and their families."

Jackie Nehls agrees that Mitera is well suited for the job.

"He has brought positive energy, creativity and a richness to our chaplain team," said Nehls, manager of Pastoral Care at OhioHealth Hospice.

Some of Mitera's hobbies include fly fishing, kayaking, and archery. Also playing guitar, a skill which he also employs on the job.

"I use my guitar as a form of music therapy with the patients I serve," he said. "Some like to hear old hymns of faith."

As he plays and sings, he encourages patients to sing along. Many of the patients can no longer attend church, so singing becomes an act of worship for them.

Other patients like to hear folk songs. Listening to tunes like "The Red River Valley", "The Yellow Rose of Texas" and "Take Me Home Country Roads" lightens the mood, helps them to relax, and have a moment of enjoyment.

with patients that I see in a nursing home when they have no family members with them," said Mitera. "I consider this 'the ministry of presence.' Life gets lonely, and sometimes it's nice for patients just to have somebody sit with them and be with them for a while."

But talking is good, too.

"I believe it's important for the family and friends to have meaningful conversations with the patients," said Mitera. "A big one is helping the patient prepare for death and to take care of unfinished business. The biggest 'unfinished business' that some patients

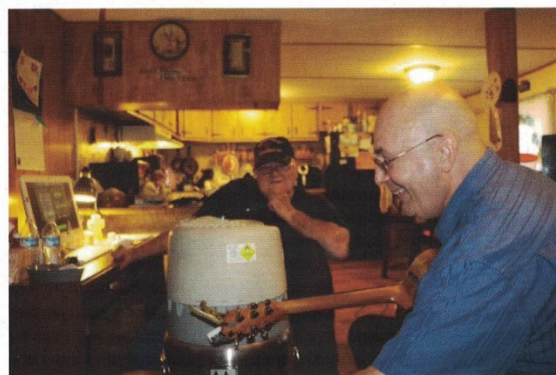
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In addition, music will often open up opportunities for further communication.

"Music is...a great means of interacting with patients who are unable to verbally communicate much, such as

have is mending broken relationships."

While that can't always be done, "You will feel better knowing that you've made an effort to do this," said Mitera.



Sometimes just having a friendly visitor to talk and laugh with can brighten the day. Mitera provides that to every patient he sees.

For David Hummel, a hospice patient, Mitera's calls provide him with love and hope and leave him feeling better.

"It means a lot to me, to have a chaplain like Mark who is really concerned about me, and does a good job with his ministry," Hummel said. "He knows the word and it means everything to me."

Generally, Mitera sees a patient once every two or three weeks. Some live in extended care facilities or nursing homes, and some are being cared for in their homes.

Visits last anywhere from half an hour to 75 minutes. It depends on things like whether the patient can carry on a conversation and whether family is

today?"

With home visits, there are usually family members who are there caring for the patient, so the family is always included in the conversation.

"I emphasize to the family members that I am not only a chaplain to the patient, but I'm a chaplain to the family members as well," Mitera said. "Following the

death of the patient, I also offer bereavement care to family members that need or desire it."

Before pursuing a career in the ministry, Mitera was an architect.

"I loved practicing architecture, and I still enjoy dabbling in it," he said. "I consider my ministry as a chaplain my calling from God. When you become passionate about a particular career, that becomes what you want to do in life."



Patients like David Hummel love it when Mark plays their favorite songs, be it hymns or folks songs. They often sing along.

present.

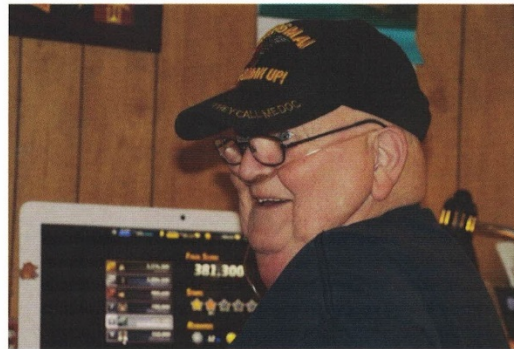
In addition to playing his guitar and singing, Mitera might read from the Bible and pray with the patient. With verbal patients he begins with a few questions.

"I intentionally leave these questions vague and open-ended to see what they lead to," he said. "It often leads to some

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"How have you been feeling since our last visit?" is one favorite query. Another is "What are your worries or concerns



David Hummel gets a chuckle out of his conversation with Mitera.



David Hummel enjoys talking and singing with Mark, who comes to see him in his home every 2-3 weeks.