To the phenomenal experts at Hospice House,

I am the niece of Mike Swinford, who died on April 15. I also happen to be a hospice social worker in Atlanta. I discovered my calling in hospice while serving as a music therapy volunteer in Hospice House at Hospice Savannah. I decided on a career in hospice after my grandfather died in ICU, alone, restrained, our family unaware that he was actively dying.

After that experience, and my volunteering, our family began financially supporting Hospice Savannah. That same year, my Uncle Mike experienced heart failure, a shock to us as he was in his 40’s. He eventually received a heart transplant and a second chance at life. After many years of anti-rejection medications took their toll on his body, his kidneys began to fail. He received a kidney transplant. After several years, his transplanted kidney failed also. He began dialysis. He never complained. He cherished his wife, Jane, and was grateful for every day. He was our family’s hero. He was an example of courage, faith, and perseverance. He also knew what his limits were.

When he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in January, he knew he did not want extraordinary measures to prolong his suffering. He asked his doctor for a referral to hospice. He knew what he wanted. He understood the palliative philosophy. Our family had just been through the death of my grandmother in 2016 and saw the benefit of the palliative approach at the end of her life. Accepting his impending death and planning accordingly was his most courageous act. He spent time with family, gave instructions to loved ones, and asked to go to Hospice House for his last days.

He had been a transplant patient for 18 years, and everyone’s goal was to keep him alive as long as possible! It was difficult for our family to “switch gears” and stop worrying about vital signs and constant monitoring. But the staff at Hospice House was patient, compassionate, and attentive. I had no doubt that Hospice House would give him (and us) the best care possible. Even my greatest expectations were exceeded.

The personal touches of Happy Hour, a basket of goodies for the family (I think volunteers brought those), the education and hugs given by the nurses, the person-centered care you provided Uncle Mike- it did not go unnoticed. The Admissions RN even came into his room to greet us, she remembered my Uncle and Aunt, and even helped transfer him back into his bed. Alicia and Debbie were caring for him during his first night there. Their approach and comforting presence immediately won me over. The following day, Beth was caring for Uncle Mike and she was able to get his agitation managed. When we left, seeing him for the last time, he was sleeping very peacefully. Please don’t ever underestimate the power of the “last look” that you provide for families when you get their loved one comfortable. It is one of the many gifts you give to families.

As one who has been on the professional side for 14 years, and the personal side several times, I want you to know that I know how hard your job is. I know you were tired at the end of the week. But you still gave us all you had, and you did it beautifully. I hoped for perfection, because I know how the job should be done. You delivered, and though I wasn’t a bit surprised, I am so grateful. You gave our hero a dignified, peaceful, and family-focused farewell.

The Swinford family will continue to support Hospice Savannah through word, donation, and prayer. My parents are hosting a “Summer Nights” party this year, two days before my Uncle Mike’s birthday.

Thank you for everything you do, for every patient and every family member. As a hospice professional, I am forever changed because I was on the receiving end of the care of Hospice Savannah.

On behalf of my family,

Meredith Swinford