Do we ever really stop to think about what our birthday means? A birthday is a celebration created especially for us. It can be a once-a-year reflection on the true celebrations in our lives: our accomplishments, the hurdles we have conquered, and the tears we have cried. A birthday can be a chance to spend time with those who feel blessed because we were born; the people we choose to stand beside us and to witness our highest and lowest points. At what point do we really understand what the last holiday, summer, anniversary, or birthday means?

As hospice workers, we learn to understand the importance of celebrating the lives of our patients who are imminently dying. Many of us who are not terminally ill take our birthdays for granted. We take the presence of those we love on this special day for granted, and we assume that there will be another birthday the following year. Ironically, the patients we care for daily understand that this is a moment to be cherished. Our patients, who are at the end of life, appreciate the importance of this day. They possess the bittersweet knowledge and understanding that this is one of their final opportunities to celebrate with the people they love.

We believe that every hospice patient should be given the opportunity to celebrate his or her birthday in comfort, with loved ones. It was with this in mind that the Birthday Brigade program at Hospice Buffalo was born. The program is funded entirely through donations and is run through our Volunteer Services Department. The week prior to the birthday, a volunteer coordinator calls to ask the patient and/or caregiver if the patient would like a special birthday celebration. They are asked what their favorite cake, pie, dessert, or savory treat is. Once the request is received, our dietary department springs to action, lovingly baking each request. By far the most common request is chocolate cake with chocolate frosting; however, we have made special orders of Black Forest cake, tres leches cake, and lemon meringue pie. Some cakes are even made with special shapes and colors in mind, and cakes decorated with princess themes and popular cartoon characters consistently delight many of our pediatric patients.

During the initial offering call, families respond with immense gratitude and genuine surprise. Celebration and anticipation is often the response volunteers get when they deliver the birthday treat; and the number of thank-you notes that have poured into the agency about this beautiful gesture is unprecedented. Not one single project that I have been involved with in my 20 years at Hospice Buffalo has generated so much appreciation. The patient and family feedback received by our nurses, social workers, pastoral care chaplains, and home health aides is truly uplifting. Just as important is the positive reaction from staff that is a testament to the success of the project: celebrating life.

One particular Birthday Brigade volunteer truly embodies the spirit of the Birthday Brigade. He truly understands and respects the importance of Hospice Buffalo’s mission. To the delight of all, he delivers the cakes dressed in a tuxedo. As you can imagine, the response from patients and families is something that cannot be put into words. He has created lasting memories that will continue to bring a smile to the caregivers for years to come.

Here are some of the notes and messages Hospice Buffalo has received from the families:

My arthritis would have prevented me from making my husband a cake for his birthday and I am just worn out. When I received the call about getting a cake for his birthday, I decided to invite over his old poker buddies. We had a wonderful afternoon!

It was my Mom’s birthday, my sister and I didn’t know if it was appropriate to celebrate, it was too bittersweet to celebrate her last birthday. We received a call from a lady in the volunteer office who said ‘Yes’ would be happy to deliver a cake for my Mom. We ordered her favorite, Black Forest, and invited the family over. For a short while we forgot Mom was sick—we laughed, celebrated, and just enjoyed the moment. Thank you Hospice.

Thank you so much for my husband’s birthday cake. It was delicious. It was nice to have on his actual birthday. We celebrated with his kids on Saturday and his 82nd birthday was great!

In 2012, 503 Hospice Buffalo patients celebrated their special day with cakes, doughnuts, containers of pistachios, baskets of snacks, and a beautiful bouquet of flowers for those patients who could no longer eat. The program is so successful it has spurred families to celebrate more than just birthdays. We have baked cakes for couples to celebrate their wedding anniversaries, early holidays, and other momentous occasions in their lives.

This program is worth the time. It is worth the phone calls to families to find out the way they want to celebrate. It is

Celebrating Life at the End of Life: The Birthday Brigade

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worth finding funding and a group of volunteers willing to assist in making this program work. It is worth collaborating with community bakeries if making the cakes in-house is impractical. The measure of programs like the Birthday Brigade is hard to quantify. The impact might not be immediately tangible, but isn’t that what true hospice care is about? After all, isn’t it the intangible, the sometimes spiritual events, that shape and bring meaning to the end of our lives?

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