

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Kristy Athens, Community Relations Coordinator
541-308-2114 or kathens@hospiceofthegorge.org

Hospice of The Gorge Celebrates National Volunteer Week With Training Opportunity

April 15 to 21 is National Volunteer Week

March 12, 2007 – Hood River, Ore. – Natalie Hassell is a firm believer in hospice work and the people who provide it. Hassell, volunteer coordinator at Hospice of The Gorge, devotes her time not only to arranging the volunteer schedule to benefit the patients of the region's oldest hospice organization, but also to coaching and nurturing the volunteers themselves.

“Stepping into a person's life during the dying process is being present as a ‘guest’ in a place of change and transition,” says Hassell. “Hospice is rewarding work, but it can also be emotional work. I make sure that our volunteers feel supported as well as valued.”

Volunteers begin their commitment with a strong base—an 18-hour training program that includes a thick notebook of materials, and presentations from a number of Hospice of The Gorge staff: medical director, nurses, social workers and chaplains. The program covers a wide spectrum of end-of-life topics, from safely lifting a patient from bed to understanding dementia. There is no cost to attend the comprehensive training sessions.

Hospice of The Gorge's volunteer program has evolved since the agency's beginnings in the early 1980s, when *everything* was done by volunteers—even the nursing. While still a nonprofit organization, nowadays Hospice's professional staff support the family caregivers throughout its seven-county service area in Oregon and Washington.

“No ‘personal care’ is expected of our volunteers who work with patients. It's more of being a companion or friend, and giving the caregiver a break,” says Hassell. “Conversation is important—most is about regular day-to-day things. The volunteers often provide emotional support for caregivers as much as patients.”

What most volunteers don't consider is what they receive in return. “We say, ‘the dying are our best teachers,’ so it's interesting to hear from experienced volunteers what the lessons are,” says Hassell. “Most of them are not flashy, ‘writing in the sky’-type of lessons. Often patients remind us of how limited our time is, and what to nurture in our own lives and relationships.”

Volunteers are asked to spend two to three hours per week with patients. “We're very flexible with schedules,” notes Hassell. “Some volunteers are busy at certain times of the year, or traveling out of the area. We can work around that.”

Some volunteers prefer to help in the Hood River or The Dalles offices, providing administrative support or medical equipment delivery. Hassell checks in with her volunteers to make sure they remain comfortable with their work, provides “in-service” opportunities and does not hesitate to refer them to one of the Hospice chaplains if they need it. She acknowledges that volunteering with hospice patients is different than helping the community in other areas—it can be more difficult, but also more profound.

“Volunteering for Hospice of The Gorge helps people realize that death is not just a medical event, but a personal event as well,” Hassell says. “Spending time with patients shows volunteers that hospice care is about how you live.”

#

Hospice of The Gorge has since 1981 provided comprehensive care to those who face life-limiting illness. Hospice of The Gorge is a nonprofit, Medicare-certified organization that provides ethical, professional and compassionate care while respecting personal, cultural and spiritual values. From offices in Hood River and The Dalles, Hospice of The Gorge serves seven counties: Skamania and Klickitat in Washington, and Hood River, Wasco, Sherman, Gilliam and Morrow in Oregon. Hospice of The Gorge receives support from the United Way. Please visit the website for more information: www.hospiceofthegorge.org.

Sidebar:

Hospice of The Gorge volunteer training takes place at the Wasco County PUD Building in The Dalles on the following three days (all must be attended): Friday, April 13 from 6 to 8 p.m.; Saturday, April 14 from 8:15 a.m. to 4 p.m.; and Saturday, May 5 from 8:15 a.m. to 4 p.m. Training is free-of-charge; lunch and materials are provided. For more information or to register, call Natalie Hassell at Hospice of The Gorge toll-free: 866-680-4684.

Photo caption:

Natalie Hassell and volunteers Leonard Porterfield (left) and Ray Lueck (right) prepare a newsletter edition for mailing.