



PHOTO: RORY McNAMARA

T.L.C. Director Frank Ostaseski says the Zen Hospice Project works to care for patients' spiritual and physical condition.

Caring for the dying with an Eastern touch

Zen Center's hospice is a
sanctuary for the terminally ill

By Michelle Terwilleger
NEIGHBORHOOD REPORTER

In the hospital room where Robert received his last formal cancer treatments, he felt his emotional and spiritual ability for dealing with his impending death falling apart.

Two years after his wife, Diana, moved him into the guest house of the Zen Hospice Project on Page Street, she can still remember exactly what he said when he came to the center: "I feel as if I'm in a sanctuary."

"Once he got into the hospice, it was as if he was glued back to-

gether again," said Diana, who chose not to use her last name. "He recovered all his serenity and peace of spirit."

Diana isn't sure if it's the constant availability of tea and food, the home furnishings, or staff members' willingness to listen that makes Zen Hospice Project so effective, but she and Robert aren't the only ones who have experienced a profound peacefulness upon entering the four-bed, Victorian home in the Western Addition.

Frank Ostaseski, founding di-

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THE NEIGHBORHOOD

NOE/HAIGHT/CENTRAL EDITION

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 1998

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rector of the Zen Hospice Project, exudes that peace and warmth when he discusses people's universal fear of death.

"We will all die. We need to make friends with this experience," Ostaseski said. "We have to really look at the notion of seeing death as failure. Do we all end up as failures? It's a natural part of our lives. It's not a failure. It's a package deal: we live, and we die."

Ostaseski started the nonprofit hospice in 1987 as a part of the San Francisco Zen Center, and the hospice began leasing the Page Street house from the Zen Center in 1990. The goal was to create a place where terminally ill San Franciscans could die surrounded by love and compassion instead of in fear and isolation.

Treating mind and body

The Zen Hospice's guest house, working with the Hospice by the Bay, provides patients with pain relief through medicine, oxygen, and intravenous drugs when necessary. In addition to providing for the physical bodies of patients, caregivers at the center also take a "whole person" approach to the process of dying, Ostaseski said.

"We look at the whole human being and assess spiritual, emotional, and physical needs," he said, "and we do the same for their family."

While the center's guest house can only serve four people at a time, each year the project trains 50 hospice volunteers, who serve patients both at the guest house and at Laguna Honda Hospital's hospice unit.

Volunteering to sit by the bedside of someone who is dying isn't something to be taken lightly. Zen Hospice Project staff members ask volunteer applicants about their feelings concerning death and their personal motives for getting involved.

"If people came here and didn't have fear, I would be worried," Ostaseski said.

Volunteer training

Through a 40-hour, three-week training that is certified by the California Board of Nursing, volunteers learn practical care skills, encounter hospice family members like Diana, and learn to deal with issues of mortality.

Ostaseski stresses that fear, pity, and hollow words bring little comfort to the terminally ill, and he explains that hospice volunteering means removing the barriers separating the patient from the attendant.

"Pity is touching pain with fear. Compassion is experiencing pain with another," he said. "It's a way of understanding that their suffering is my suffering."

"It's hard. It's not like being a candy stripper," Ostaseski said. "It will show you yourself, it will show us our dark and shadowy places,

and it will call forth our compassion."

Marj Yasueda, who has been a hospice volunteer at Laguna Honda for three years, says sometimes her job means sitting quietly by someone's bed, holding a hand or massaging feet.

"On my first day on the ward, I sat with a man who was dying of cancer, and it was very clear he was terrified by what was happening," Yasueda said. "I sat and held his hand and talked with him."

"I really, really enjoy being with someone who is scared and just helping them relax into the process," she said. "It's like when my children were babies, and I would just be patting them on the back."

A caring touch

Volunteers find that every patient is different, and while some may just need a hand or foot massage, others need to talk.

Chiaki Ushiyama, a resident at the guest house for three months, says he appreciates the willingness of the staff and volunteers to talk with him.

"They're very nice. It's something like a family life," said Ushiyama, known as "Boss" by all his friends. "They are more easier to talk to. In the hospital, it's, 'I'm sorry, I can't talk to you. Go to the office.'"

The Zen Hospice Project's approach to caring for the dying has its roots in Buddhist practice and

many of the volunteers are Buddhists, Ostaseski said.

"Buddhism has as a central tenet the understanding that everything is impermanent. We see how precarious life is," he said. "When we struggle against impermanence, we suffer."

Alan Waugh, a hospice volunteer at Laguna Honda for five years, says he finds just sitting next to patients and trying to breathe with them helps him to experience a bit of their pain as he tries to lessen it.

"As a practicing Buddhist, this is the most obvious practice of compassion that I give in my daily life and the most tangible Buddhist practice to me," Waugh said. "Trying to exude love has its benefits. People do respond to that — just holding somebody's hand with the knowledge that someone is there and caring for you."

While Ostaseski encourages volunteers to practice meditation to experience the calmness and balance they need to sit at the bedside of the dying, he said the project does not expect patients or volunteers to be Buddhist.

"When a client needs spiritual support, Zen Hospice tries to make available clergy from whatever tradition that client prefers," he said. "They don't come to us because we're Zen Buddhists."

The Zen Hospice Project will begin its next session of volunteer training classes on October 21. Call the project at 863-2910 for information.