



# Passing Hope On

The journey to build Our Community House of Hope BY TERESA WOLF, BSN, RN

In 2005, while working for a volunteer hospice, I met with a young woman who had stopped in to seek out resources as she faced her final weeks of life. Kim wore a turban because she had lost all of her hair due to her chemotherapy, but she was still beautiful. The death of her parents at a very young age left her and two younger brothers without family. She was eventually separated from her brothers and remained completely alone with no family to help.

She had recently lost her job because of her increasingly ill health and was living with a roommate who could not care for her. In desperation, Kim turned to an old boyfriend's mother for help as her death approached. It was in this woman's living room where Kim was suffering through her final days. I could sense her anguish and felt helpless being unable to offer her any better resources for care. While I felt privileged to gain her confidence and friendship as she shared her fears prior to her death, Kim still felt like she was a heavy burden on this family. She died in less than 2 weeks.

YVONNE ROSHONG

## A Compelling Need

A few weeks later, I was called on to help support another woman. This time she was 48 years old and a single mother of four young daughters. She and her girls lived in a low-income apartment where she was facing the final days of ovarian cancer. With no money and no extended family to help, her 14-year-old daughter was trying to care for her every need. There was no way to hire a caregiver and no alternative place for her to spend her last days. This agonizing scenario made it impossible for this

woman to die peacefully. The scars left on the hearts and minds of her daughters will last a lifetime.

After dealing with these and many similar cases in our community, I felt compelled to move ahead with a plan to provide a home for those who have this basic human need for a proper place to die. The Our Community House of Hope (OCHH) project grew out of these experiences and the desire to help vulnerable community members during their final transition.

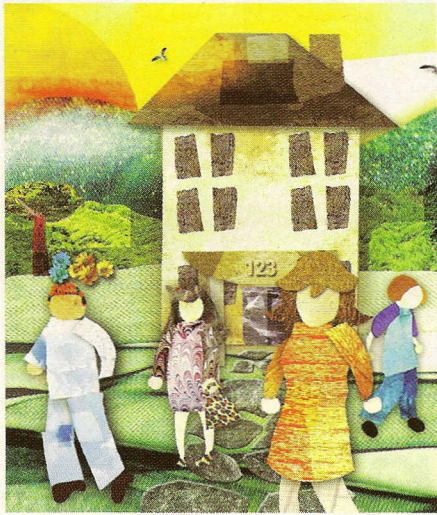
## Dignity in Death

Working in the hospice field for the past 11 years has helped me understand that a person's final days can be some of the most sacred and valued times of their life experience. At birth, we honor the sacredness of new life and rejoice. As we approach life's ending, it also needs to be a time of great sacredness and dignity — an opportunity for us to find

inner peace. For this to happen, there needs to be a special home provided where the possibility of spiritual healing can be made available to everyone. The vision of OCHH grew from this belief and the desire to ease suffering. While still in the planning phase, OCHH will be a place of healing at the end of life.

**A Stark Contrast**

My business partner in the OCHH project, Ruth Klein, moved to the U.S. from Denmark 15 years ago. She also is a nurse by background and worked in the Danish healthcare system. In Denmark, the feeling is that everyone



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—Teresa Wolf, BSN, RN

deserves the best individual medical care at the end of life without having to worry about cost, insurance or income. If a family prefers to have their loved one in a hospice instead of at home, these locations are readily available at no cost.

Three years ago, Ruth started working for the local volunteer hospice and has been saddened by her almost weekly visits with seniors in desperate need for help with end-of-life care. Most of these patients are without money to hire caregivers and have no family support system. Ultimately, the majority of these seniors are placed into a Medicare-licensed nursing home where there is no privacy, no dignity and the staff are not well-prepared to care for the dying patient.

**A Hidden Crisis**

When we began gathering statistics to support our vision for OCHH, we realized we were seeing just the tip of the iceberg in the end-of-life care crisis. We could find no state or federal agency ambitious enough to find a solution to the problem. In Ventura County, our Medical Hospice agency social workers are reporting they see about 30-50 people each month who need this type of care.

The facts Ruth and I discovered in our research efforts toward creating OCHH showed increasing numbers of elderly and indigent patients dying without proper access to care. It was a sobering picture, at best. When applied to the Ventura County area, it was cause for alarm. The nearest of only two small hospice facilities was 60 miles north in Santa Barbara. To the south, one would have to travel 150 miles to Long Beach. The need for such hospice care homes was so imperative that we were even more determined to move ahead with our plans.

**Realizing a Dream**

The goal of OCHH is to build and operate a social model residential home to provide compassionate, free-of-charge, end-of-life care to eight patients at a time. Emphasis will be placed on meeting the emotional, social and

spiritual needs of everyone involved, including family members. Medical care for patients will be overseen by an external medical hospice nursing agency. OCHH also will provide community educational programs for the student interested in end-of-life issues.

In 2005, we began this project with just a handful of willing people who had a desire to make OCHH a reality. Most of them had been touched by hospice care in some way. Within a year, our committee grew to more than 30 members. We achieved our nonprofit status in 2007 and are now actively fundraising and creating community awareness through media support and special events. While SB 462 is in the hands of the State Assembly and could

eventually provide funds for hospice care, the bulk of the financial requirement remains our responsibility.

**Destiny by Design**

It seems whenever there is a special need, a silent prayer is answered and the perfect person appears to help us. We now have doctors, nurses, hospice volunteers, accountants, architects, builders, event planners, business and community leaders joining our ranks. One of our primary spokespersons is Miss Outstanding Teen of Ventura County, Chaya Turrow. She has single-handedly raised more than \$2,000 for OCHH.

While operating costs might be a concern in a facility that offers complementary care, destiny seems to intervene once again. My research for OCHH led me to Clare House, a similar facility in Tulsa, OK. Its committee raised \$6 million to see the facility realized. We believe that as the community sees the good OCHH will do for them, the good is returned to us.

**A Real Solution**

Our hope is to get the first OCHH house operating by 2010 and then act as a model and facilitator to help other communities develop their own House of Hope. We estimate the first home will cost approximately \$5 million. Our goal for 2008 is to acquire the property.

Every member of our committee believes that together we can create a beautiful solution to a difficult crisis. With every accomplishment, our dream is coming into view. Through efforts like OCHH, our communities can gracefully link arms to meet the basic need of our neighbors, value to each final moment of life and pass on the hope. ■

For more information about OCHH, go to [www.ourhouseofhope.org](http://www.ourhouseofhope.org)

Teresa Wolf is co-founder of OCHH and would like to thank her partner and OCHH co-founder Ruth Klein for helping with this article.

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