

Palliative Care, it's more than you think.

By Dianne Donnellan

Anne and I became friends when she came to work for a large company where I had worked for a number of years. For all of that time I had been the only female in the department so having her join us was exciting. She was a kind and caring person always happy to help everyone. We became good friends straight away. We went out for lunch together; we went shopping; and visited each other at home. I got to know her family. She had two children, both adopted, and very much loved.

Anne had campaigned for a crossing with lights at the local school after a small boy had been hit and killed by a car. She was very proud of the safety it provided. She was by nature a quiet and reserved person so conducting that campaign was out of her comfort zone. She did it because she believed in the need for it.

About five years after we became friends Anne was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. I guess we both believed that she would undergo surgery, recover, and go on with life. But that didn't happen. It became obvious after a few months that the cancer was terminal. It seemed unbelievable – she was in the prime of life with two children who needed her. This couldn't be happening, but it did. Slowly she became weaker and more ill. Eventually she was admitted to a hospice which specialized in palliative care. It was a lovely place despite its purpose, with kind and caring staff. It can't be the easiest job to care for people you know you will lose.

The minister and some of the ladies from my church volunteered at this hospice. Their job was to man the "drinks trolley" which they took around every afternoon to deliver one drink: a beer or glass of wine, to patients who had been authorized by their doctors to have one. It was a small treat for people whose lives were slipping away. The volunteers told us with much laughter of having to watch the trolley closely because there were patients who would help themselves to more if the chance arose.

As the disease progressed Anne became more and more tired. The effort of making conversation took a toll on her. I visited often or phoned when I couldn't go. It was hard to see this beautiful and vibrant person lose interest in everything around her. Eventually, she asked me not to come to see her or phone anymore because she said she had nothing to talk about. I was devastated! I knew she was tired and worn out but to see her giving up was shattering. She passed away about a week after that.

The day of Anne's funeral was a beautiful sunny day. We sat in the church with the sun streaming through the stained glass windows, painting colours across the people inside. As we all sat in our combined grief music started to play – and Anne's beautiful voice started singing. It was one of the strangest experiences of my life – distressing and moving at the same time. A few years previously a relative had asked Anne to sing at her wedding. Anne was so shy that she couldn't bring herself to sing in public so she had recorded her voice (which was clear and strong) accompanied on piano by a friend who was a nun. I can still remember the fear she had of performing in front of others. Her family had used her recording as a tribute at her funeral. I will never forget the feeling of hearing her voice again, with the sun streaming through and warming our bodies and hearts. It was beautiful.

And what has this to do with palliative care? Not just that Anne had been placed in palliative care as her illness progressed, but that the "quality of life" which is the aim of people who work in this area includes not just freedom from physical pain but laughter, friends, and family. Having a terminal illness doesn't eliminate a sense of humour, the ability to make new friends, or the small highlights which make every day one to be treasured. Nurses in palliative care know that all their patients want and need is to be treated normally – not spoken to and about in hushed voices. To be able to live every day remaining to them in laughter and friendship with those around them.