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Our newsletter is mailed twice a year to patients and family members, donors, community supporters, and other friends of Hospicare. If you have received multiple copies of this newsletter, please let us know so we can correct the mailing error. In addition, we welcome your thoughts or feedback about the contents. Contact us at communications@hospicare.org.

Find more articles and information on hospice, palliative care, advance care planning, and grief support at hospicare.org.

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PHOTO BY EMILY HOPKINS



Dear Friends,

I write this letter to you from Virginia, where I am staying for a few days to help care for my mother, who has been having health problems and is in and out of the hospital. As you may know from personal experience, it is incredibly hard to see a loved one suffer. But my brother and sisters and I count ourselves extremely lucky to be on our mom's care team, to hold her hand and to advocate for her as her doctors make decisions and treatment plans for her.

As I hope is clear from some of the stories in this issue of our newsletter, Hospicare & Palliative Care Services exists to help not only patients but also their friends and families and caregivers. Serious illness, including illnesses that are sometimes inevitable with advanced age, can be scary and stressful for all involved. This is where Hospicare & Palliative Care Services plays its most important role: as calm, experienced, and compassionate companions to you and your family as you navigate uncharted waters. It is our honor to be part of your care team.

If you have helped Hospicare in any way—by swimming in Women Swimmin' or volunteering to read to patients or help out in our gardens, or maybe by making a monetary gift or helping connect someone to our services—thank you for being an important member of our community's care team.

I love walking along the shore to the Atlantic Ocean. It always brings me peace. But I look forward to returning home to Ithaca soon to see the fall colors, attend a bonfire, and be with the community that does so much to take care of each other, day after day, year after year.

Warmly,

Joe Sammons
Executive Director



On the cover:

On Swim Day, August 9 this year, the lake is full of love—neighbors, friends, and families coming together to make waves for care and connection. This is what community looks like. See more about the 22nd Women Swimmin' for Hospicare on pages 4 and 5.

Best Wishes on Your Retirement



After 26 years of dedicated service, Wendy Yettru is retiring from her role as Hospicare's volunteer manager this November. For more than two decades, Wendy has been a guiding presence for our volunteers, offering encouragement, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to the patients and families we serve.

Her leadership and heart have touched hundreds of lives and helped shape the spirit of volunteerism that defines Hospicare today. Wendy leaves behind a lasting legacy and some very big shoes to fill.

Wendy, thank you for all you've given to Hospicare. We wish you joy, rest, and adventure in this next chapter of your life.

House Calls for the Seriously Ill but Not Hospice Ready

Nurse Practitioner Morgan Ryan to Provide In-Home Palliative Care



This August, Hospicare's leadership was thrilled to hire Morgan Ryan, who has occasionally worked per diem in the Hospicare residence since 2022 as its first full-time palliative nurse practitioner. Morgan will be leading a new palliative program that will serve up to 150 people struggling with serious illness.

"The hope is that although they may not qualify for hospice, we can really use our expertise to manage symptoms and have discussions about their care while they can really participate in those conversations," Morgan explains.

Highly Experienced

A native of Ossining, NY, in the Hudson Valley, Morgan has been a nurse for 18 years and has worked with palliative patients for 15 of those years, including as a palliative triage nurse. But her experience with palliative care began when she was an oncology and bone transplant nurse at Mt. Sinai in New York City.

"We had an inpatient palliative care team," Morgan recalls. "A lot of my patients benefitted from advance care discussions. I'll just never forget how compassionate and present and thoughtful the palliative nurses and doctors were in every interaction. So, I began paging them often, to see all the peo-

ple I was caring for," she remembers with a laugh. "Morgan,' they told me one day, 'I'm sorry, we'll need a medical order.'"

Among Morgan's mentors were two of the world's leading palliative practitioners, Dr. Diane Meier and Dr. Sean Morrison. "I got very lucky," Morgan reflects.

Her doctoral work focused on providing palliative care education to interdisciplinary health care providers to increase their comfort with integrating primary palliative care into their practice. "Teaching on palliative care is one of my greatest loves!" Morgan says. "Even though palliative care is a specialty practice, I think it's important for all providers to have foundational knowledge of its benefits."

Filling an Urgent Need

Hospicare's medical director, Dr. Lucia Jander, has seen firsthand the need for this new program: "Our community has been asking for a strong in-home palliative program for many years," Dr. Jander says. "We will improve the quality of people's lives while also taking some of the burden off the shoulders of busy primary care doctors and specialists, who are often simply unable to sit down for an hour-long conversation with a patient or to stop by a patient's house to check on their pain and symptom management, let alone support their emotional health and their family's."

People in Tompkins and Cortland Counties will be able to sign on for palliative care a few different ways: by asking their primary care provider or specialist for a referral, or by referring themselves for care simply by calling the agency and requesting a consultation house call. A family member or caregiver can also make the call.

Medical Care That Is Also About Listening

Morgan is a strong believer in the power of those unhurried one-on-one health consultations.

"Simply sitting down and hearing their story increases relatability," she says. "I always just think of that golden rule: how would I want to be treated? How would I want my family member to be treated? We want to solve things and offer all this advice, but there's something very powerful about just sitting and listening, allowing a person to tell their story in a safe and supportive environment."

Morgan shares that she always asks her palliative patients what brings them joy, so that she can help them integrate whatever that is into their lives. Because receiving palliative care often extends people's lives and reduces hospitalization, there is often more time to pursue those things that bring joy.

"I once provided care for a man with advanced heart disease who loved woodworking," she says. "After he died, his family shared with me that those extra moments with him that the palliative care made possible were a gift. His spirit was lighter. And he built all these birdhouses. And I got one. It's a Phillies birdhouse. (I don't know much about sports.) But every year for the past five years there have been these beautiful birds' nests in it. I'll never take it down. I loved that man so much. And that memory is such a beautiful reminder of how important it is to help people achieve their goals. It seems so simple, but it's not. Our system is so complex; there's too much information thrown at us when we're sick. Sometimes just having a simple conversation can offer new information and a new plan for improving the quality of life."

Women Swimmin' for Hospicare Breaks Records in 2025



“I am so grateful for the work you all do to help fund this precious resource and service to the community.”

—Rosemarie Dement

Thank you to everyone who made this year's Women Swimmin' for Hospicare such a success! This summer, hundreds of swimmers, paddlers, volunteers, supporters, and Go the Distancers came together to celebrate community, compassion, and care. Together, we raised \$681,822—surpassing last year's total—and helped ensure that hospice and bereavement care remain available to everyone in Tompkins and Cortland Counties. We're deeply grateful to everyone who swam, went the distance, supported, and cheered for another incredible year of Women Swimmin'.

Statistics

327 swimmers
170 paddlers (registered)
140+ volunteers
46 Go the Distancers
7,326 donations
\$681,822 raised

Top 10 Fundraisers

(in order starting with the top amount)

Ann Costello
Lucia Jander
Kate McKee
Betsy East
Joan Brumberg
Jane Powers
Melinda Oltz
Susan Austern
Kathy Eliason
Lisa Amato



Thank you to our volunteer photographers for capturing the joy, courage, and connection that make Women Swimmin' such a beautiful reflection of our community. Their time and talent help bring Swim Day to life; we couldn't do it without them!



PHOTOS BY
PAGE 4: TOP—MICHAEL BENNETT;
MIDDLE—EDNA BROWN;
BOTTOM LEFT—JOE WILENSKY;
BOTTOM RIGHT—EDNA BROWN
PAGE 5: TOP—MICHAEL BENNETT;
MIDDLE LEFT—MICHAEL BENNETT;
BOTTOM LEFT—JOE WILENSKY;
BOTTOM RIGHT—EDNA BROWN



Starfish

Suzanne Aigen	Roz Guterman
Susan Austern	Lucia Jander
Kerry Barnes	Sheryl Kimes
Joan Brumberg	Chris Kimball*
Connie Colbert	Gundy Lee
Ann Costello	Sally McConnell-Ginet
Susan Cowdery	Janet McCue
Betsy East	Michelle Nardi
Kathy Eliason	Jane Powers
Clare Fewtrell	Lauren Putnam Davenport
Sharon Fornaciari	Caroline Rasmussen
Amy Fuhr	Susan Robinson
Mariette Geldenhuys	Wolfgang Sachse
Denny Grout	Beverly Schmidt

Amy Seldin-Murphy
 Shelley Semmler
 Ruth Siegel
 Nancy Spero
 Christina Stark
 Gail Tremblay
 Andrea Volckmar
 Jennifer Wilkins
 Alicia Wittink
 Susan Zehnder

*new in 2025

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The Cat Who Brought Music to Hospicare (and the Woman Who Led the Charge)



Gracie's story began in Room 6 at the Hospicare residence on King Road.

One day, a patient started asking for extra milk with unusual frequency. The secret he was hiding didn't stay a secret for long, and eventually, an aide went to then Executive Director Nina Miller. "You should probably come down to the room," the aide said.

As Nina walked down the hall, she noticed that the nurses and staff were all watching her. When she opened the door, she understood why: curled up next to the patient was a black-and-white cat, sound asleep.

The nurses worried that Nina might send the cat away. Instead, Nina could see that the patient—and the staff—had already grown attached. After making sure that the cat wasn't missing from a nearby home, she decided to let her stay. The only thing left to do was to name her, so Nina went from room to room, cat in her arms, asking residents for suggestions. One name stuck: Gracie.

A Comfort Like No Other

Gracie quickly became part of daily life at the residence. She trotted freely throughout the building, visiting with residents, families, volunteers, and staff alike. And while she spent time with everyone, she often formed close bonds with specific patients, curling up beside them in their final days.

Staff even noticed that she would grieve after a resident passed.

At night, they'd sometimes carry her from room to room, saying, "Say goodnight, Gracie"—a nod to George Burns and his wife, Gracie Allen, who used to end their television show the same way.

Patients began to see Gracie as more than a companion. One, Jean Hope, called her a "nurse angel" for the way she never left her side. When Jean died, her family asked that donations be made in her honor to a new fund: the Gracie Fund.

Those gifts gave Hospicare the chance to start something new.

From Cat to Choir

In 2005, longtime Hospicare volunteer and musician Jeannie Barnaba suggested that Nina call Jayne Demakos, who was already bringing music to the residence in an unofficial capacity. Jeannie knew Jayne's background as a harpist and certified music-thanatologist made her the perfect fit for their needs.



Nina followed up on the suggestion and soon invited Jayne to begin a music program at Hospicare. With the Gracie Fund as its foundation, Jayne launched Women Singin'—a playful echo of the Women Swimm' for Hospicare fundraiser. About twenty women gathered and sang choral, ambient songs in the great room of the residence for patients, who could hear from their rooms if their doors were open.

The goal was simple: to invite the community into the residence and offer patients gentle, loving sound. Over time, Women Singin' evolved into the Threshold Choir, now connected to an international network of nearly 200 chapters that share a common vision: A world where all at life's thresholds may be honored with compassion shared through song.

Threshold Choir singers receive training around death and grief, learning to bring calm and tenderness to the bedside. Their harmonized voices create a lullaby-like quality—something that feels personal, intimate, and deeply human. While not a substitute for music therapy or music-thanatology, the Threshold Choir singing "complements both beautifully," Jayne says.

Jayne's Calling

Jayne herself is trained as a music-thanatologist—as she sometimes describes it as a "medical harpist"—who specializes in end-of-life care. Using harp and voice, music-thanatologists address what Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of modern hospice, called the "total pain" of patients: physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological, and social suffering.

Through music, Jayne and her colleagues help ease anxiety, insomnia, respiratory distress, high blood pressure, and even ex-

Jayne Demakos (left) often plays at the Hospicare residence, providing comfort and tranquility to residents, visitors, volunteers, and staff.

istential pain. “Music can create a sense of wholeness, healing, and connection,” Jayne explains. “It can restore the soul, and sometimes even help create a kinder dying.”

In addition to her work at Hospicare, Jayne taught at Ithaca College, often bringing students into the residence to experience the power of music at the hospice bedside.

When COVID-19 shut everything down, both her teaching and her position at Hospicare were put on hold. Jayne moved to Washington state for a two-year position as a full-time music-thanatologist at a large hospital. When her contract ended, she returned to Ithaca—and to Hospicare.

A Legacy of Music and Love

After several years at the residence, Gracie found a permanent home with Jeannie, where she lived out her life in comfort. Jeannie herself died at the Hospicare residence in the spring of 2025, leaving behind a legacy of compassion, service, and song.

Today, thanks to the cat who wandered into Room 6 and the people who carried her legacy forward, music is still part of the care Hospicare provides. Patients and families who want music services can ask their care team, and those who feel called to share their musical talents can contact our volunteer coordinator, Wendy Yettru, to learn how to get involved.

See Jayne Perform Live This Fall

Jayne will be performing at the Temple of Joy yoga studio on November 2. She weaves patient stories and harp playing into her performance, *A Harpist at the Threshold: Stories of Love and Grace*. For more details or to purchase tickets, please scan the QR code below.



The volunteers at Cornell Companions are a frequent and welcome sight at the Hospicare residence. Patients and their families enjoy spending time with the dogs (like RubyRae), and the dogs enjoy the extra attention (and treats!) they get when they visit.



Seated from Hospicare and Palliative Care Services are, from left, Margo Holley, marketing and communications manager; Joe Sammons, executive director; and Emily Hopkins, director of development and community relations. Standing are the members of the Foundation Board of Cortland County, from left, Jule Venum, Evelyn Sammons, Gail VanPatten, Chris Cecconi, Nancy Wainwright, Kathy Rutan, Pam Sullivan, Merle McKowan, Nancy Fuller, and Dianne Higgins.

Joining Together for Compassionate Care

Since 2014, the Hospice Foundation of Cortland County has been a steadfast supporter of Hospicare—not only through generous financial gifts but also by helping spread awareness of our mission. The foundation’s annual Light of My Life event on the Village Green in Homer draws community members together each year for an evening of remembrance and celebration.

As Hospicare prepares to launch our new palliative care program, one of the first milestones was raising \$200,000 to support the program through its early years. On July 17, the foundation surprised Hospicare staff with a \$50,000 gift, closing the fundraising gap and ensuring this important program can begin strong.

“This is a pivotal moment for Hospicare, and as members of the Hospice Board of Cortland County, we are honored to make a meaningful monetary gift in support of expanding services to include palliative care for the Cortland and Tompkins County communities,” says Hospice Foundation of Cortland County secretary Brenda Teeter. “It is a privilege to stand with Hospicare in extending comfort, guidance, and compassionate support to clients and families during life’s most difficult times. With this expansion, even more people will receive the vital care and reassurance they need when it matters most.”

We are deeply grateful for our partnership with the Hospice Foundation of Cortland County and its commitment to making compassionate care available to more families in our community.

Did you know? Most hospices in the United States are for-profit—but not here. In New York, 37 of 39 hospice providers are nonprofit. Hospicare is proud to be one of them.



Upcoming Events

Light in the Darkness

November 9, 2025, 7:00 to 8:30pm, First Unitarian Church in Ithaca.

All in our community who are grieving, regardless of whether your loved one died on Hospicare's services, are welcome. Join us in the sanctuary, light a candle in memory of a loved one, and share in a special program of remembrance.

Clay for the Healing Heart for Adults

Tuesday, December 9, 6:00 to 8:00pm, Clay School in Ithaca

Open to both Cortland and Tompkins County residents

This workshop is offered as a collaboration between Hospicare and the Clay School. It offers adults, age 18 and over, who are grieving the loss of a loved one the opportunity to process their grief through the art of hand building a memory box. Participants will receive their boxes at a later date after they have been glazed and fired. Registration is required by December 4 and there is no cost.

Registration for these events is available through our website at [Hospicare.org/events](https://www.hospicare.org/events)