

# HITTING A GRANNY BEA

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*When asked how they can do the work of a social worker in a hospice, the author answers by telling the story of one fascinating patient and the patient's wonderful family, the story of "hitting a Granny Bea."*

As a social worker for a hospice program, I am often asked, "How can you do what you do?" I always reply that "it is a privilege to work with dying persons and their families." That rather noble response usually stops further inquiries, but it also does not let the inquiring person really know why I choose to do what I do. So I follow up my response with, "Let me tell you a story which will help you understand . . ." I then proceed to tell them the story of "hitting a Granny Bea."

Ms. Bea was one of my first hospice patients. She was in her late seventies, very thin and frail but with a fierceness of spirit and energy (even when lying in bed) that put my energy level to shame. When Ms. Bea became bed-bound, she insisted that her bed be moved to the living room of her small, comfortable home so that she could be in the "middle of the action." As she requested, the bed was placed in front of the large picture window that dominated the living room. The window afforded Ms. Bea a view of her lovingly tended yard and allowed her to be an observer of the comings and goings in the neighborhood. She enjoyed watching the birds and squirrels playing in her yard. From her bed beside the window, she loved watching the seasons turn.

Ms. Bea had been married and became a widow. She had been a career woman when it was unusual to be one. She had two sons, Ken and Mike. After Ms. Bea retired, she came to live in the same town as her son Ken, his wife Jo Ann, and her two young grandsons,

Jake and Taylor. Ms. Bea was diagnosed with cancer and battled it successfully for many years. But eventually the cancer began to win, and Ms. Bea needed help to stay in her home. An unlikely helper emerged—Jo Ann's mother, Delores. Delores had cared for other patients and, when needed, came from Arkansas to Mississippi to care for Ms. Bea. They had a great time together, and the grandsons loved having two grandmas in one house.

During the months that I served as Ms. Bea's hospice social worker, we had many visits together. Sometimes, we talked about her plants and flowers. She tried patiently and diligently to instruct me in her gardening techniques. She just wouldn't listen when I expounded on my firm belief that I did not have a "green thumb." She gave me small plants from her garden, and I'm sure she grieved when I reported their demise under my care. We talked about life—her life and life in general. We also talked about death.

One day, I asked Ms. Bea what she thought was going to happen when she died. She was quiet for several moments, then shared her belief that we were all part of a great cosmic whole and that when we died we became part of an eternal cosmic entity, a part of the universe. To speed and ease this process, the very practical Ms. Bea decided to be cremated. Cremation in rural Mississippi was a bit out of the ordinary in those days but seemed to fit Ms. Bea's philosophy.

Ms. Bea had been a religious person in





the early part of her life. However, she had experienced some painful events in her church and left the church, along with religion, several years before I met her. She wanted no clergy, no funeral, no fuss after her death. She wanted a party! She wanted a gathering of family and friends at her house to remember her, tell stories, drink, eat, and have a good time. This wish, although somewhat unusual for the social community to which she belonged, seemed to suit Ms. Bea's spirit perfectly.

Ms. Bea and I talked about her wishes for the moments surrounding her death. I always try to ask patients if there are songs, passages of scripture or poetry, and persons they want (or don't want) with them as they are dying. Ms. Bea's request, once again, was somewhat out of the ordinary. She wanted music—JOAN BAEZ! What seventy-year-old woman wants Joan Baez playing at her death, I wondered. Ms. Bea, of course!



As Ms. Bea became more weak and frail, she gradually became more and more unresponsive. We encouraged the family and Delores to continue to speak to her, to stroke and hold her hand, and to let her know she was not alone.

Early one Saturday morning in October, my beeper roused me from sleep. It was time to go to Ms. Bea's house. She was dying. It was one of those perfect fall days—cool and crisp, the sky a vivid blue, leaves in glorious color—a day Ms. Bea would have loved. When I arrived, the family—Ken, Jo Ann, 7-year-old Jake, 5-year-old Taylor, and Delores—were standing around Ms. Bea's bed. As time passed, the boys became restless and went in and out of the door to play outside. We finally decided to leave the door open so that Ms. Bea could hear the

birds and the laughter of her grandchildren. After one visit to the oak tree in the yard, Taylor brought in an acorn. He wanted to give it to his Granny Bea. We adults looked at each other uncertainly. Finally, I gently opened her hand, Taylor placed the acorn in it, and I slowly closed her fingers around the acorn. Taylor smiled and ran outside to play in Ms. Bea's yard again.



With Joan Baez singing softly from the stereo, Ms. Bea's breathing became very shallow, with long pauses (called apnea) between breaths. With her loved ones encircling her bed, touching and loving her, Ms. Bea took what I believed was her last breath. Through my tears, with all the solemn authority I could muster, I intoned, "She's gone." Ms. Bea promptly took a breath. After several more breaths and a very long pause, I again rather pompously intoned, "She's gone." Again, Ms. Bea had other ideas—she took another breath. This time, with laughter and tears, I said, "Okay, Ms. Bea, this is your show. You run it any way you want to. I'll be quiet." Soon after, she really did take her last breath. You will have to believe me when I say that if death can be beautiful, Ms. Bea's was beautiful—loving, peaceful, and in Ms. Bea's own style.

Ms. Bea's party was a fine affair. Her family and friends gathered in her home to look at pictures and mementoes, tell stories, and generally celebrate Ms. Bea's life. She would have loved it!

Jo Ann shared with me at the party that Ms. Bea's ashes were going to be scattered around a gingko tree that Ms. Bea had loved at the country home of Ken and Jo Ann's. The home is surrounded by beautiful trees

beside a lake. I thought it was the perfect spot for Ms. Bea.

The next spring, I met Jo Ann and asked her how the scattering of Ms. Bea's ashes had gone. She gave me a very sheepish look and said, "If I tell you something, you have to promise you won't think we're crazy." Fascinated, I quickly agreed, and Jo Ann told me what had happened when the family gathered to scatter the ashes. Jo Ann said that they had gathered in a lovely spot and talked about Ms. Bea and how much she loved and was loved by them. Jake spoke up and said that he remembered how much Ms. Bea loved to see the boys play baseball on the nearby baseball field Ken had made for the boys. Then he floored his parents by asking, "Since Granny Bea loved our baseball field so much, can't we put some of her ashes there?" Ken and Jo Ann looked at each other and hesitantly walked with the ashes toward the baseball diamond. They stopped at home plate and, hoping for Ms. Bea's understanding, scattered some of her ashes there. The boys, really getting into the spirit of the event, insisted Granny Bea also needed to be part of first, second, and third bases. So the scattering continued around the bases. The boys were ecstatic, and soon Jo Ann and Ken joined them in feeling that Ms. Bea would surely have enjoyed the idea of becoming a part of her grandsons' life in such a special way. Jo Ann went on to say that now on "Granny Bea's field," when someone hits a home run, they hit a "Granny Bea" and have to touch all her bases. And I thought, "Wouldn't she love that? She really is a part of that eternal cosmic whole!"



And so, to the person who inquires how I can do what I do, I tell them it really is a privilege to work with dying persons and their families. They tell me much more about life than about death. They enrich my life daily. It's a privilege.

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