

Feature

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Still here and enjoying life Comfort and care helps hospice patients live longer

(LIVE OAK)—When Haven Hospice touched base with former patient Gene Stallings recently, he was delighted to report that his health is stable and he feels pretty good. “I’m still kicking,” he said, “—not as high as I used to, but I’m still here.” Stallings, who lives part of the year in Live Oak, was headed back to his home in Asheville, N.C., where he plans to have his garden ready to plant by May.

“Hospice patients sometimes do get better and occasionally they recover,” said Haven physician Dr. Michelle Boatwright, who cared for Stallings at the Suwannee Valley Hospice Care Center in Lake City. Boatwright experienced this firsthand when Stallings improved and went home.



A March 2007 study of nearly 5,000 terminally ill patients revealed some surprising news—patients in hospice care live longer than patients who have similar conditions but are not receiving hospice care. Published in the *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, the study’s findings challenge the notion that hospice care hastens death.

“We have speculated for a long while that terminally ill patients do better while in hospice care, but it hadn’t been definitively proven until this study,” said Boatwright.

Although diabetic, Stallings had been in good health when he was suddenly diagnosed with diverticulitis and hospitalized with gastrointestinal bleeding. His doctors and nurses told his wife Peg that his organs were shutting down, his prognosis was very poor and he was not going to survive.

But Stallings' condition improved within days after he was admitted to the Lake City care center in February 2007. Dr. Boatwright adjusted his medications while the staff addressed his personal comfort and dietary needs. At first, family and friends continued to prepare for the end. A nephew played Stallings' favorite music—Suzy Bogguss and Chet Atkins—as he slept, and a dear friend began planning a memorial service. “They were all *that* sure I was going to die,” Stallings said.

But in time, he was eating, drinking and sitting up in a chair—resuming normal functions. Healing had begun. “Everyone was so kind and did so much for me,” he said, “I decided I wanted to live. I pulled through.”

“This was highly unusual for a hospice patient,” said Boatwright, “but it has happened more than once.

“If the patient's situation changes,” she added, “the focus of care changes. There's a process of reevaluation every day. We like to say Mr. Stallings was able to ‘graduate’ from Haven Hospice.”

“Hospice care focuses on making the patient more comfortable,” said Haven physician Dr. Neel Karnani, “which enhances the quality of life.”

Stallings believes his own system started him back on the road to health when the Haven staff was able to make him comfortable.

“Everyone did such a marvelous job,” said Stallings' wife Peg, who did what she could to assist the staff with his care. “We couldn't have asked for anything better.”

“I can't say enough about how nice they were; they really took care of me,” Stallings said, “and I think the world of the people at Haven. We are strong believers in hospice care, especially Haven. That's the best place to be.”

Stallings, 78, has resumed his high quality of life—still doing everything with his wife at his side and enjoying their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. “I'm feeling optimistic,” he said. “I'm a tough old bird. If you stay around long enough, you're gonna get old.”

Boatwright hopes that Stallings' experience will be a lesson to seek hospice care sooner. “To improve the quality of life and possibly add precious time for patients with life-limiting illnesses,” she said, “I encourage physicians to refer qualified patients to Haven Hospice earlier in their disease process.”

Photo Caption: R.G. (Gene) Stallings and wife Peg at their home in Live Oak.

About Haven Hospice

Haven Hospice is North Florida's expert in end-of-life and palliative care and is one of three 2008 Circle of Life Award® winners nationwide to be recognized as leaders in improving the care of patients near the end of life or with life-threatening conditions. Haven Hospice has also been recognized as a Florida Pacesetter for its leadership in promoting living wills. Haven Hospice has served nearly 50,000 patients and families since 1979 and has been licensed in Florida as a not-for-profit hospice since 1980. For more information, visit www.havenhospice.org or call 800-727-1889.

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