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JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

A Hospice for Those Who Have No One

A former nursing professor creates a place to care for the poor and alone in their final days



Karen Cassidy was inspired to start her hospice by the 12th century nun and healer Hildegard of Bingen. PHOTO: JESSICA EBELHAR FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Julie Halpert

April 21, 2019 10:00 p.m. ET

After 30 years as a nursing professor in public health and gerontology in Kentucky, Karen Cassidy worked for a short time as a palliative-care nurse practitioner at a hospital in Louisville.

“I felt like I really made a difference in relieving suffering,” Ms. Cassidy says.

But it was frustrating, too. Some of the worst times, she says, were when terminally ill patients without support or family had to be discharged because no further treatment the hospital could offer was going to make them better. Homeless individuals received taxi money and were returned to shelters. Those who lived by themselves and couldn’t afford caregivers often went home to die alone. One patient, an elderly woman on Medicaid, was sent to a long-term-care facility in another state, far from her friends, because no Medicaid beds in long-term-care facilities were available in Kentucky.

KAREN CASSIDY

Age: 62

Hometown: Louisville

Primary career: Nursing professor,
palliative-care nurse

Current path: Executive director,
Hildegard House hospice

Why this path: She says it is gratifying to see residents who once were “sick, alone, in pain, hungry and afraid” be provided care in a dignified environment.

Ms. Cassidy left the nursing job in 2013 and went on a pilgrimage to Bingen, Germany, where she walked in the footsteps of the 12th century Benedictine nun and healer Hildegard of Bingen, whose good works included providing healing and hospice care to her community.

Inspired by Hildegard’s example, and armed with a business plan of her own, Ms. Cassidy in 2015 launched the effort to build Hildegard House in a renovated former convent in Louisville. Funded by grants and charitable contributions, Hildegard House accepted its first resident in July 2016.

“We are not a licensed hospice, but a home for people that need to access hospice care that have no loved ones or live alone or are homeless,” Ms. Cassidy says.

While volunteers at Hildegard House working in shifts give support and care that a family would provide, a licensed hospice nurse visits once a week to be sure that residents have the medications they need (orders are placed through the mail and sent directly to Hildegard House). A part-time nurse communicates with the hospice nurse about the residents’ symptoms and change of status. In addition, a social worker and chaplain visit every two to three weeks. A bath aide can come and give a bath one or two times a week.

Three residents can stay at Hildegard House at a time. There have been nearly 70 to date. The longest stay lasted four months. The shortest: An 80-year-old widower and war veteran passed away after a single day.

Ms. Cassidy, 62, was one of five winners of the 2018 AARP Purpose Prize, which provides \$60,000 to an individual over 50 who is focused on making a positive impact. She handles everything needed to keep the house running, including referrals, assessments and evaluations, payroll, insurance and grant writing. She hopes to hand over the daily operations to someone else within the next couple of years, but plans to stay involved in raising funds.

People often ask her how she can stay in a job where death is so pervasive. She says it’s because she finds it so rewarding to see residents who once were “sick, alone, in pain, hungry and afraid” be provided a home and care in a dignified environment.

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As Ms. Cassidy sees it, “To give people the food they like, the music they like to hear, to see them relax and be at peace at the end of their life—there’s nothing sad about that.”

Second Acts looks at the varied paths people are taking in their 50s and beyond. You can reach Ms. Halpert, a writer in Michigan, and let us know how you’re starting over, at

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