

# Dying friend's stories bounce with life

By Karen Garloch

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One of my best friends is dying.

Only 56, she has been ill for so long that, years ago, she typed a five-page record of her medical conditions and past diagnostic tests. The depth of the list astonishes nearly every emergency room nurse or doctor who has had to figure out how to take care of her in a crisis.

But Kathleen McClain never acted like a sick person. She continues to live with courage and flair.

Almost four weeks ago, she moved to the Levine & Dickson Hospice House in Huntersville, where the surroundings are peaceful and the caregivers are compassionate.



**Kathleen McClain**

The word “hospice” scares some people. Because it's associated with death, many people who could benefit from the tender, loving care of hospice workers wait too long to arrange for it. Then they die before they and their families can appreciate the wonder of the experience.

Kathleen actually seems to be thriving in her huge private room, with floor-to-ceiling windows that let her feel the warmth of the sun and watch spring emerge in the pink and white of cherry trees and dogwoods.

Surrounded by loving relatives and friends, she exults in telling the stories of her life.

Kathleen has always been a dramatic storyteller. She likes to take her time and let the details unravel slowly. And she uses her huge hazel eyes and her long, elegant hands to express what the words don't convey.

In recent days, she has talked almost constantly, telling many of her stories repeatedly. It's hard to get her to answer a question because she gets distracted by a thought that leads to another story that we may have heard only minutes before.

Part of this is caused by medicines, but I think there are other reasons, too. I've been reading a book called “Final Journeys,” by Maggie Callanan, a longtime hospice nurse from New England.

“There is a pattern of behavior well-known to those who work with the dying and their families: people die as they live – intensified,” Callanan writes.

Kathleen's loquaciousness now is an amplified version of her natural and enviable ability to entertain with outrageous or hilarious tales.

Callanan makes another good point: “I’ve learned that most dying people want to impart what they’ve learned from living as well as from the process of dying. They often want us to realize how precious life is. They want to help demystify the journey for us and remove some of the fear.

“Finally, they are searching for affirmation that their life mattered to those who crossed their path and that they’ve made a difference by being here. It is our responsibility not only to tend to the physical needs of the dying, but also to receive, appreciate and validate their wisdom.”

On a recent Saturday night, three other friends and I brought dinner to Kathleen – Italian antipasto and pasta dishes that she loves, a nice bottle of Chianti and exquisite pastries from ethnic bakeries in Cleveland and Boston. It reminded her of the 16 trips she’s taken to Italy, some with friends and some on her own. We shared the food and wine (only a little for her, because of the meds), and we sat around her bed, listening to her stories.

We laughed when she described the 30-year-old, stretched-out bathing suits she says we’ll find in her lower dresser drawer. And we cried when she expressed her wish that we should scatter some of her ashes at one of her favorite spots in Tuscany.

We listened for four hours, until she finally admitted she might be a little tired. And the next day, we came back, pushed her in a wheelchair out into the sunshine, and listened some more.

She loved it. And so did we. It was a great gift in the midst of great sadness. And by listening closely and lovingly, we let her know that her stories matter, that her life has mattered, and that she will never be forgotten.

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### **Additional Information**

[McClain's 2001 story on Billy Graham in Berlin](#)

### **Contacts**

Levine & Dickson Hospice House (owned by Hospice and Palliative Care Charlotte Region), 11900 Vanstory Drive, Huntersville; 704-375-0100.

Carolinas Center for Hospice & End of Life Care, 919-677-4100 in Cary; 803-791-4220 in Columbia.

“Final Journeys: A Practical Guide for Bringing Care and Comfort at the End of Life,” by Maggie Callanan, Bantam Dell, 2008.

“Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs and Communications of the Dying,” by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley, Poseidon Press, 1992.