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Living to the Fullest at Bampa's House

Jan 01, 2022 09:00AM • By Karey Solomon



Jennifer Houghtalen, director of Bampa's House and a nurse practitioner, works there because her mother told her she should. When her elderly mother lived with Jennifer and her husband in an apartment across the street, she often sat at the window to watch the renovations going forward at 170 East First Street, Corning, then being reborn as a comfort care residence.

She told Jennifer, "That's for people who don't have what I get. Jenny, when you're done with me, you go over there and work."



After her mother's death, Jennifer crossed the street and signed up to volunteer. Instead, she was recruited as the facility's first director.

A comfort care residence like Bampa's House provides services not only to a person at the close of life but also to their family. Less institutional than a hospice facility, it takes in only one or two people at a time for care in a homelike setting.

Named for the late Jim Dugan, known as "Bampa" to his grandkids, it opened its doors in September 2020 after years of planning and fundraising. The goal was to provide the sort of end-of-life care most people, like Jim, wanted but were unable to have. Candidates for residency here are people whose life expectancy is three months or less. There's no active treatment, only medications to make the person comfortable. "Allergy medications, antidepressants, pain relief, and oxygen," Jennifer explains. "There's no rulebook. It's an algorithm with a lot of heart and soul and conversation."

The beauty of the house and its hominess are a large part of the picture. After several incarnations, including a time it served as Corning Hospital's personnel office, the building sat vacant for many years. Meanwhile, Bampa's family spent years fundraising and searching for the ideal space to realize their vision. After looking at more than fifty properties, they found and purchased this one in 2018, says Bampa's youngest sister, Joan Wilson. "All of 2019 and part of 2020 was dedicated to its restoration," she says.



"This house is about love," Jennifer says quietly. "It's our strongest volunteer and has a character all its own. The residents feel it. It's non-judgmental and forgiving. It has no resentment about having to be rebuilt. It's just a passage in its time. And it's grateful."

She's quiet because a mother in a nearby bedroom is very close to death, surrounded by her adult children. Jennifer pauses to look in on them, then slips away again. If anyone needs her, she and several other volunteers are only a few steps away.

The facility runs by the grace of fundraising and the help of volunteers. Bampa's House holds several major fundraisers a year; they also receive donations from the community. Residents and their families pay nothing for their stay.

"You want to die with respect, with peace, without your family stressed," Joan says. "You don't want them worried about financial burdens and your caregiving. We're trying hard to take that away."

"It's a time," says one family member, "when all we have to do is love."



Jennifer recently trained a group of twenty volunteers from LECOM, a medical school with a new campus in Elmira, "because they want this intimate caregiving experience [to inform their future medical practice]," she says. Volunteers are always needed—it takes thirty of them, in addition to paid staff, to assist one patient every week. Jennifer trains each one; then a new volunteer works alongside a more seasoned one until confident to work on their own.

Mary and Patrick Keeler, who have volunteered from the very beginning, originally stepped up, "Because we wanted to see this succeed," Patrick says.

"He didn't really think he could do it," Mary adds. But Patrick found he enjoyed listening to residents' life stories, as well as sitting peacefully with those who no longer could speak. As of this writing, about twenty residents have passed through the house.

When Jennifer takes a visitor to the beautifully-remodeled kitchen, one point of interest is the freezer, well-stocked with ice cream. "You can have ice cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, if you want," she says. "It goes down smoothly, it has nutrients, and there's no work involved in eating it." When one recent resident asked for something different—a martini—volunteers made sure he got a good one. "And sometimes," Patrick says, "someone might not want more than one bite, or they'd want to smell the food but not eat it." That's okay with everyone, too. When someone is in residence here, it's their home, and their wishes come first.

Moving on to a room being readied for tomorrow's new resident, Jennifer points out the abundant windows, the deck reached by French doors wide enough so a resident who wants to enjoy fresh air or stargaze can have their bed moved outside. There's a pretty handmade quilt on the bed. Charlotte Dugan, widow of Jim, made the quilts found on every bed, as well as the table toppers warming the common rooms. Charlotte, who has moved out of the area, often returns to help. And sometimes she looks around for a space that could be enhanced with another work of handcrafted artistry.

Upstairs are rooms where family members may nap or remain overnight.

What brings volunteers, residents, and families together at Bampa's House is life. "I tell volunteers this is better than a book club," Joan says. "It becomes a whole network of incredible people and yes, it really is a happy place."

One of their residents called it that. His family heard him telling this to distant friends on the phone. Joan remembers that he even attended a volunteer party in the house. "He celebrated life until he couldn't," she says.

That resident, like so many, embodied the spirit of Bampa's House. If the ideal life begins as a babe welcomed with joy, the part of the journey ending in leave-taking can also be a time of beauty, gratitude, and sometimes even joy.

For more information, visit bampashouse.org or phone (607) 654-4205.

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