

Lights in the darkness

By Laura Raines, *For ajob*, Published on: 03/14/08

Job description: Must be prepared at a moment's notice to deal with other people's distress, sadness, fear, pain and death. Skills needed: considerable. Hours: too many to mention. Rewards: priceless.

Would you answer the ad?

We know that life isn't all sweetness and light, but, given a choice, most of us probably wouldn't choose jobs in which we consistently meet people at the worst times of their lives. Fortunately, hospice workers, domestic relations attorneys and funeral directors, to name a few, are willing to do that every day. Why? They feel called to help — and know that they can.

CAROL "ZOE" KLINGLER, hospice nurse

In 1976, Carol "Zoe" Klingler, a nurse, helped her mother care for her dying father at home. Hospice, which is compassionate care that meets the physical and emotional needs of terminally ill patients at care facilities or in their homes, was a new movement in America then. She didn't know about it.

"When I heard about this role, I knew I'd do it someday. My mother and I would have loved some advice and guidance," she said.

Klingler worked in hospice periodically when her children were younger, and, in 1994, she joined Visiting Nurse Hospice Atlanta full time. Her job is to help control the pain and symptoms of terminally ill patients and to help their families care for them and, then, say goodbye.

"My job is to enhance life as long as God gives it," she said. "It's a wonderful feeling to be able to relieve someone's symptoms. We can't always do a perfect job, but we can make things better."

Klingler said that being comfortable with her own mortality and her Christian faith allows her to deal with other people's suffering.

She knows that the family has been on a journey before her and will continue on once she is gone, but, for this brief time, she will travel with them as clinician, educator, comforter and friend.

"You can't help but love them. You shed tears with them and share their smiles and victories," Klingler said. "You know so much more when you sit in someone's kitchen and have coffee with them. You become attuned to others' needs and relationships, and it informs your practice.

"You learn to listen more than you talk, and [you] learn what you can change and what you can't."

When patients' symptoms are controlled, they may feel well enough to go get doughnuts with their grandchildren or to go fishing.

"The positive thing about an expected death is that people have the ability to make things right, to plan for their loved ones, to tell stories and make memories," Klingler said.

"I tell patients that dying just may be their finest hour."

Klingler constantly is inspired by the families she serves, and she draws strength for the job from her relationships with her own family (husband, three children and nine grandchildren) and friends.

"People burn out when there's no fuel. You have to find a source of fuel when your job is working with people in bad situations. You can't give what you don't have," Klingler said.

She's discovered that happiness is a byproduct of serving others.

"Helping other people is a blessing to me," she said.

