

how we feel

Wednesday, November 2, 2011

Daughters of compassion

Yvonne Jackman, a community sister at St Luke's Hospice, and the first in our 'Daughters of Africa' series on 'women who care', goes above and beyond the call of duty in sharing her gift with others.

Photographs: Pippa Hetherington | Words: Kim Chaloner



"I feel that the work I do is a God-given vocation, a calling. Everybody has a gift... whatever it is will always be revealed."

Yvonne's first task is to help her patients to manage their pain – emotional, spiritual and physical – 'so that they can have quality of life.'

Sister Yvonne Jackman is about to embark on day 5 of her 7-day walk across the Cape Peninsula, to raise funds – and awareness – for St Luke's Hospice. We met her in her Newlands home, and shadowed her as she paid a visit to one of her many patients... in both environments revealing her calm and compassionate nature, and admirable strength. She shared with us a little about her life's journey, her toughest lessons, and the importance of family...

It is amazing to give the gifts of compassion and care and love to others. My job is to go in to meet the patient and to assess them, their symptoms, their nausea and their pain – and to understand what kind of pain it is. Our assessment is not only physical, because there are so many emotional needs, issues and challenges. And pain comes in various guises: there's physical pain, emotional pain, spiritual pain. I find it a huge privilege to go into somebody's home,

where they'll sit and talk to me, and I don't have to probe much before it all starts to come tumbling out — their fears, and problems with family members or finances.

I've never left a patient after my first assessment without them saying, 'thank you so much because now we've got somebody we can talk to.' I have to build up trust and a relationship as quickly as I can. We all have our own different ways of doing that. I'll go in and pick out a photograph and say, 'Oh! What a beautiful child'. It's probably a grandchild, and then we talk about the grandchild for a while before we get into anything else. It's a very confidential relationship, and all we can do is listen. We all get emotionally involved, you can't not do. And I don't go to all funerals, but I do go to some because very often I need closure too.

People say to me, 'Oh, this job is so depressing, how do you do it?', but I don't find it depressing, I find it sad because all of our patients are facing a life-threatening disease. But it's what you can achieve from the time you meet them until the time they die. We aim to get their symptoms controlled so that they can have quality of life... and to get them to live, as best and as well as they can, for the short period of time they have remaining to them.

My area stretches from Salt River to Bishopscourt. It's very diverse and I enjoy that. One of the things that frustrates me to a degree is that we're always busy with a lot of patients at once and often I'd love to go back and visit the families, but there just isn't time.

I have always been a nurse. My husband, Robin, wanted me to go into business with him so I gave up nursing for about 12 years in 1991. And I really couldn't wait to get back. When I finally did I said to Robin, 'Please don't ever, ever, ever ask me to give up nursing again!' Although working with Robin was fun — we organized golf days — it didn't give me



St Luke's model of care takes place in the patients home whenever possible.



Close bonds are formed quickly in this line of work. 'You form friendships with people,' says Yvonne.



Yvonne and the St Luke's sisters don't just dispense medication, but also love, compassion, and a listening ear.

the same job satisfaction as nursing. During this time I worked as a volunteer at St Luke's. Robin and I had married in 1970, and for the next 14 years we were backwards and forwards between South Africa and Rhodesia and Surrey in England where he played international cricket. In that time we had two daughters.

The reason I got into palliative care was because of my mother. She had breast cancer. I have three sisters and the four of us got together for the last five or six weeks of our mother's life and we nursed her at home. My mother taught me how badly we nurse terminally ill patients in hospital. Because hospital is for cure it's all rush, rush, rush; it's surgery; it's patients backwards and forwards into theatre. But terminally ill patients need quiet, and they need space. We nursed Mum at home and she was wonderful at talking us through what she was going through, She kept asking us how we were feeling, and I realized how desperately important it is for patients to talk, and to be able to say, 'I am feeling so angry today!' or 'I am sad today.' I was just grateful I was able to nurse her the way we did – we were there all the time, she had amazing nursing care because three out of us four girls are nurses.

My wish is for women in South Africa to believe in themselves. I'm from an old-fashioned time, when I still think the man should be the head of the household, and that he should lead in all aspects, but I think women should realize and understand their value and be equal. I think as women we also need, from a cultural point of view, to respect each other. Women are incredible people because they juggle everything: they work, they bring up children, they run the home, they are just such valuable people in the world. They need to appreciate their skills; and never to be afraid to take on challenges; never to think, 'No I can't do that' because we can. If we put our minds to it we all can.

Home for me is in South Africa. I honestly believe that once you've got Africa in your blood you cannot get rid of it. It's such a part of me. I love being right in the midst of the bush. It makes me feel humble. What a huge privilege to sit and observe amazing nature. I love it, absolutely love it.

Keep up with Yvonne Jackman's 'Making a Difference' walk on www.facebook.com/pages/St-Lukes-Hospice/35764967303. Ryan O' Connor will be talking to Yvonne and her fellow walkers on 94.5Kfm Breakfast tomorrow morning 3 November at 06h45. For more information about St Luke's Hospice, contact www.stlukes.co.za.