

40 STORIES IN 40 YEARS



Kate Harris Volunteer, Anam Cara Colac

(Pictured Kate with guest, Nathan)

How did you learn about palliative care?

When I was about seven years old my family moved in with my grandparents to help care for my grandmother who had had a stroke and was bedridden. The district nurse let me assist her by putting the clean pillowcases on. I learnt that you do not hold the pillow with your teeth!

How did you get involved as a palliative care volunteer?

I completed a Cert III in Aged Care in 2010 as a mature aged student. I did a placement at Barongarook Gardens in Colac and loved it. Then I was most fortunate to be employed at Mercy Place in Colac. I could not believe the feeling this job had been waiting just for me.

At the same time Diane Wright was establishing Anam Cara House in Colac. I put myself forward as a volunteer. I felt a great pull towards palliative care for some reason. I was still enjoying working at Mercy Place and could see that the extra attention, love, and care was appreciated by each person near the end of their life as well as their families. I would sometimes sneak that little extra tub of ice cream in for someone in my care.

What does your volunteer role include?

I help with personal care, general cleaning, preparing snacks and meals, assist with meals, listening, talking, comforting. I enjoy being a bit silly to make guests laugh. I assist staff, guests, families to complete tasks. Anything really, I do not mind what I do.

What are some of the highlights volunteering in palliative care?

Just how amazing people are, how generous of spirit they are. How we get to share experiences, the good, the bad and the sad. I have not seen the ugly.

Is there a person or patient that stands out for you?

Anam Cara's first day respite guest. Her husband (and carer) was able to feel confident that she was safe and would enjoy her short-term respite. I have built a close relationship over the past 10 years with this guest and Cheryl (another volunteer). Time spent with them has provided some of my most memorable volunteering moments.

What has been your most memorable volunteering moment or experience?

When I was volunteering one day, helping with an end-of-life guest, I had my first experience of being there when someone passed away. The nurse on duty was just so gentle and caring to the dying man. She played music that he liked, quietly in the background and she spoke to him gently as he died, continuing after his death. I picked a rose and placed it on his chest at her suggestion. It was such a special beautiful moment and I felt privileged to be there.

Can you share a positive change in palliative care in the last 40 years?

Attitudes have changed. When I was young my grandmother was at home with us, family provided the care mostly with some outside help. There is a greater recognition for care in home like environments such as Anam Cara than 40 years ago.

What change would you like to see in palliative care in the future?

People need to be unafraid to seek options for place of care, to not feel guilty if they cannot cope with caring for someone at home and to understand that there are alternative supports available to them. There needs to be greater awareness of these options and governments should be financially supporting these options.

What is your advice for someone thinking about volunteering in palliative care?

Firstly, to remember that it is about the guests and their families – not about you. You need empathy and to be a good listener, non-judgmental, to know when to be quiet and let people feel comfort in silence. If you are kind and thoughtful, you will be ok.

There is always someone in the team to bounce ideas off. Do not be scared to suggest something you feel people may like.

What do you think is the secret to a good life?

Really live your life, be in the present, do not just skirt around the edges. Say yes to things you might normally say no to. Keep learning, new recipes, a language or volunteer your services. It does not have to be world changing, simple activities give just as much pleasure. I once went to a funeral of a lady and all they did was speak about her husband, how sad. That's not for me thanks!