

Tree of Life: A Legacy of Care

Livingston HealthCare's Home Health and Hospice and the Livingston HealthCare Foundation share the history of the annual Tree of Life celebration. The event is an intimate opportunity to recognize the lives of our loved ones by dedicating a light to shine in their honor or memory. This beautiful ritual—which was ignited 35 years ago from compassion and dedication—brings hope and healing to many in our community during what can be a difficult time of the year.

A Knock on the Door

For Marleen Anderson, it all began with a knock on the door. “I’ll never forget that moment,” she says, recalling her introduction to hospice care in 1985. A volunteer, asking for an “Adopt-a-Grandparent” plant donation, introduced Anderson to Livingston’s Gateway Hospice—a new idea at that time—and set Anderson’s life on a new path.

The volunteer explained that hospice cares for the terminally ill so that they can live out their lives with dignity, surrounded by comfort and compassion. Those words resonated deeply with her. “I was so moved by that conversation that I made a donation right then and there and promised myself to help how I could.”

That encounter sparked years of dedicated volunteer work to Livingston hospice care. “It was just something I really enjoyed,” she says, “supporting the people who were doing that work.” She, along with Julie Jardine, Jody Dowell, Tom Davis and other dedicated volunteers were committed to the early success of Gateway Hospice, guiding it along its path to help thousands of their neighbors in need. Along the way, this group of dedicated volunteers created a legacy of compassion and a powerful symbol of community remembrance and support—the Tree of Life. This beacon of hope, lit by their compassion, continues to shine brightly in the Livingston community.

A Seed is Planted

In 1983, those needing end-of-life care could only receive it if they left the comforts of home for a larger town with facilities to provide palliative care. Recognizing a need, family practitioner Dr. Ira Byock envisioned Gateway Hospice, a nonprofit run by volunteers who would provide compassionate care to terminally ill patients regardless of their ability to pay.

Julie Jardine, RN, shared Dr. Byock's vision and together, they set out to make his vision a reality. Dr. Byock—now a nationally known advocate for end-of-life care—left Livingston before Gateway Hospice's official launch, but his influence remained. Jardine worked tirelessly to bring their shared vision to life, opening Gateway Hospice in 1984. Hospice care in Livingston was born, and thousands of patients and their families across Park and Sweet Grass Counties have since been shepherd through difficult times with dignity and compassion.

Gateway Hospice relied solely on volunteers for the first several years. Community members, nurses, social workers and chaplains offered their time, serving patients in their homes and providing support to family members through the end-of-life experience. One such community member, Jody Dowell, sees her time with each of her patients and their families as a gift that she is honored to receive.

Having helped hundreds of families navigate end-of-life care, Hospice workers, she says, "meet people where they are at, without judgment, to help people live out a whole life—surrounded in comfort, both physical and emotional. We are there for the patient, and we are there for the families, to guide them to—and through—the end."

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Reflecting on the lessons her forty years as a Livingston hospice nurse has taught her, she wants people to know that finding moments of humor at every stage of life, including the final one, is okay. "It's a tool to relieve stress and anxiety throughout our lives—one that really shouldn't be forgotten at the end of life."

Of hospice workers, Tom Davis, owner of Franzen-Davis Funeral Home says, "I always felt reassured and very, very fortunate when a hospice nurse would call us because they knew what we needed to do to help the family. And they also stayed with the family, supporting them until we arrived." He continues, saying "when someone dies, the families are alone and don't know what to do. Hospice workers' presence makes a real impact during an incredibly difficult period in life. That's how I became involved—I have a real soft spot in my heart for them."

The Community Rises to the Challenge

After opening Gateway Hospice, Jardine set her sights on sustaining hospice care for the Livingston community. Early fundraising efforts included an annual Move-a-Thon bike race and the Adopt-a-Grandparent plant drive, bringing in vital funds to support the hospice's mission. "We bought plants, took them to residents at nursing homes and assisted living facilities, and people would give a \$5 donation to sponsor a plant," she recalls. "Then the Girl Scouts delivered them. It was community-supported, community-driven care."

Fundraisers like these attracted the attention of local community members like Anderson who committed themselves to the success of Gateway Hospice from its earliest days. In Anderson's case, not only did she donate financially, she donated her time—joining Davis as a founding board member of Gateway Hospice. They later served together on its advisory committee when it merged with Livingston Memorial Hospital (now Livingston HealthCare) in 1989.

Jardine continued to manage hospice care for the hospital until 2002, navigating the department through the addition of home health—for those who needed support returning to daily life after injury or illness—and the early years of Medicare rules regulating how hospice care is implemented.

The Tree of Life Takes Root

As she learned how other hospices stayed financially viable, a simple but powerful idea took shape in Jardine's mind—the Tree of Life. Several trees would be planted in Rotary Park. Then, during the holidays, one of the trees would be decorated each so that, during the ceremony, it could be lit in remembrance of those being remembered. The ceremony would symbolize the true meaning of the organization: connecting and uplifting the community.



“With the Tree of Life celebration, the community could honor those who had passed, support each other during difficult times and honor the healthcare workers who made a difference in the lives of others. All with or without financial contribution,” says Jardine. “We never asked for a specific amount for a donation, it was a freewill offering. If you didn’t have money to give, you could still honor someone on the tree. And you could honor your loved one if they had lived in the area or not, had been in hospice care or not. The celebration—then and now is inclusive of all.”

The ceremony quickly became a beloved annual tradition, outgrowing its original location at the courthouse and moving to the Livingston Depot Center. Participants would receive hand-crafted Tree of Life scrolls listing all who were honored. The Park High School Chamber Choir, under the direction of Nancy Curtis, provided music for the event, lending a heartwarming touch to the celebration of life and remembrance.

Anderson remembers asking the choir director to use the song ‘Angels Among Us’ one year. “It was so moving,” she says. “She told me the kids even had tears in their eyes while learning it.” The song became a centerpiece of the ceremony, a reminder that even in the face of loss, hope and joy can still flourish. “The parents, grandparents and the community would come to see the kids sing, she notes. “It really added something special to the ceremony.”

In the early years, planting trees at Rotary Park and later decorating them with lights in December was another significant part of the ceremony. Anderson shares, “One tree, a blue spruce, was the main tree we used for the event for years. It’s still there and has grown into a beautiful, large tree that provides a quiet place for community members to enjoy with their families.” Like the first tree planted for its honorees, the Tree of Life celebration has continued to grow and adapt, reflecting the needs of the Livingston community and the hospice work it supports.



The Tree of Life: A Legacy of Compassion

Today, as the Tree of Life enters its 35th year, the spirit of compassion driving those efforts remains at the heart of the Livingston HealthCare (LHC) Home Health and Hospice. The team continues the work of compassionate end-of-life care begun years ago, facing many of the same challenges. Community volunteers remain integral to hospice care, as does financial support, to help hospice workers cover the large geographic area they serve—from Wilsall to Cooke City and parts of Sweet Grass County.

LHC's Home Health and Hospice team consists of 15 employees, who serve more than 70 hospice patients annually across Park County—from Cooke City to Livingston, Wilsall, and the remote areas in between. Today's team continues to rely on community support—volunteers remain essential to providing support and care especially in the locations further afield.

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“Making blankets, making phone calls, or simply sitting with patients, particularly in more remote parts of Park and Sweetgrass Counties, is a continual need,” says Nicki Walker, current manager of LHC Home Health and Hospice. “There is a place for all who want to take part in the ways that they can, whether it's with time

or funding.” Walker also invites all to take part in the annual Tree of Life celebration this December, saying, “it is a beautiful kickoff to the holiday season for our staff, and one we welcome everyone in the community to attend.”

The Tree of Life ceremony continues to be a powerful reminder that no one is forgotten. Davis, who spoke at several ceremonies, remarked at one such event, “It has been said that to dwell in the past keeps us from moving into the future. But I believe, however, that remembering and honoring can lift the sunken spirit, help to heal a wounded heart, and remind us that there is a future. It is a good thing we do—to remember and to honor.”

This year's event will be held at the Livingston Depot Center on Wednesday, December 4 from 5:30–7:30 PM. Cellist Kyle Brenner and the Livingston Community Choir will provide music for the evening. The choir will sing ‘Angels Among Us.’

For more information about donating to or volunteering, call LHC Foundation Development Coordinator Anita Maxwell at 406.823.6710.

