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A little piece of heaven in Sun City Center

TAMPA – Set back off of Upper Creek Drive sits a welcoming Spanish-style building. Area residents and out-of-town visitors stop by for a few minutes, a few hours or a few days. Most people who come here are confronting the most demanding times in their lives, and their friends and loved ones are glad that it is here in Sun City Center. The building is the LifePath Hospice House, and its purpose is to help patients and families make the most of life.

King's Point residents Gus and Jean Kluger knew about the Sun City Center Hospice House long before they ever needed it. When they first toured the hospice house in 2006, they noticed that the chapel didn't have an organ or piano to use for services. Jean and Gus remedied that by donating an organ that's still in use today.

Over the years, Jean and the King's Point Quilters have sewn quilts for hospice house patients. She's also had neighborhood friends depend on the staff at the facility to provide compassionate end-of-life care.

But in early 2009, Gus suffered a severe abdominal aneurysm that hospitalized him for nearly two months. Doctors discharged him to a skilled nursing facility. But Gus' health steadily declined, and all he wanted to do was go home. At that point, Jean called LifePath Hospice for help. A few hours later, an ambulance arrived to take Gus to the hospice house.

Jean knew it was the right decision, and recalls one of their last conversations. Gus was unable to speak because he was connected to a ventilator. But when he arrived, he looked around the room and then wrote on a pad, “Thank God. I’m home.”

After staff members propped him up with two pillows, Gus smiled. “We knew he was happy,” remembers Jean.

Gus spent less than 24 hours at the hospice house, but even in that short time, Jean was touched by the wonderful care she and her husband received. “The staff was wonderful,” said Jean. “They cared for Gus as if he was their father...they were angels.”

And shortly after he died, Gus’ son, Charles, played “Amazing Grace” on the chapel organ the Klugers had donated.

Sally Heffernan of Sun City Center sees the hospice house from another viewpoint – the viewpoint of a volunteer. Her husband, David, also received LifePath Hospice care, but he remained at home. A year after David died, Sally was so grateful for the help LifePath Hospice provided that she felt a need to give back. So each Tuesday she answers the phones, greets visitors and spends time with patients at the hospice house so loved ones can take a short break. “We are so lucky to have this in Sun City Center,” said Sally. “It’s so different than a hospital. Families are relieved their loved ones had this type of care.”

The primary care provided at the LifePath Hospice Sun City Center Hospice House is pain relief and symptom control. But rather than a cold, institutional atmosphere, the hospice house is warm, home like and welcoming.

Each hospice house room features a private bath, a wood-framed bed and a comfortable sleeper sofa for family members to stay the night with their loved ones. Stylish wooden cabinetry hides essential medical equipment. If patients feel up to it or if loved ones need a break, they can retreat to a shaded lanai for some quiet time. Patients are encouraged to display treasured photos and keepsakes in their rooms. And to support the home-like environment, children and family pets are allowed to visit.

One family member remarked that she especially appreciated that she and her terminally ill husband could continue to share their evening cocktails.

Jean Kluger calls the Sun City Center Hospice House a “community treasure.”

She feels that the staff at the LifePath Hospice House takes a heavy weight off the shoulders of families as they face a vulnerable time and offers hope when there’s nowhere to turn. “We are so lucky to have this in our backyard,” said Jean. “I look at it as a little piece of heaven when a person is on their way to heaven.”

For more information about the Sun City Center Hospice House, call 813-877-2200.

About LifePath Hospice

LifePath Hospice is a community-based, not-for-profit organization that supports and serves approximately 1,200 patients each day in Hillsborough County as they face the challenges of life-limiting illnesses. Healthcare professionals and trained volunteers embrace the LifePath Hospice mission to make the most of life by relieving the suffering of patients and their families affected by end-of-life issues. The organization is a 2008 recipient of a Circle of Life Citation of Honor Award, which celebrates innovation in palliative and end-of-life care. LifePath Hospice is accredited by the Joint Commission, the nation’s premier healthcare accrediting agency. For more information, visit the LifePath Hospice website at www.lifepath-hospice.org

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LifePath Hospice volunteer Sally Heffernan and Jean Kluger spend some time in the memorial garden at the LifePath Hospice Sun City Center Hospice House. Sally volunteers weekly at the hospice house, and Jean’s husband stayed at the hospice house prior to his death. Both women appreciate that Sun City Center area residents have access to a facility that provides compassionate end-of-life care.



Jean Kluger with the organ she and her late husband, Gus, donated to the LifePath Hospice Sun City Center Hospice House. Gus was admitted to the facility prior to his death, and Jean is grateful have this service available, close by and in the community.



Sally Heffernan answers the phone as a volunteer at the LifePath Hospice Sun City Center Hospice House. As a volunteer, Sally sees the benefits of having a hospice house in the Sun City Center community that is available to those who are facing the challenges of end-of-life care.