Caring end of life care when needed

By Kathie Tandberg

Oscar Stohler, 88, and his wife of 65 years (Nora Stohler), were former Dunn Center area residents who moved to Beauh in 2005 to be closer to medical care. Beauh wasn’t far from the countryside where they had lived their entire lives. When health issues arose, the Stohlers made the decision with their children, Connie (Stohler), Pat (Wensko), Carleen (Hart) and Andrew Stohler, to move into Beauh. It wasn’t an easy decision for the Stohlers, whose hearts still loved their former home where they had raised their family.

It was the country life they had cherished, not far from the soil house on the family homestead where Oscar was born in Western North Dakota. He was the one who knew the love of the land and nature, a love he carried within him his entire life. It was the life he loved horses, Oscar later moved into the bunkhouse on the Jim Conroy’s ranch near Dunn Center, where he ranched for nearly seven decades.

Oscar also raised cattle on the nearby farmhouse where he worked as a cowboy for Conroy. Later, after marrying the love of his life, Lorena (Weidner), the Connolly ranch is where the couple raised their four children: Connie, Carleen, Pat, and Carleen Hart and Andrew Stohler. The Stohlers, who were moving to Beauh was the right choice for them at the time. With three of the children living in Minnesota and one, Pat, and her husband, Rex, in Beauh, it made the move a bit easier.

A cowboy who loved horses, Oscar later moved into the bunkhouse on the Jim Conroy’s ranch near Dunn Center, where he ranched for nearly seven decades. Oscar’s “what if” moment came after an Oct. 2, 2013, appointment with Bis-marck oncologist, Dr. Thaddeus Gray.

The moment came following a positron emission tomography scan (PET scan) for the cancer he was diagnosed with the month before.

Family members were with him the day he heard that the cancer had already spread throughout his body. "Dad said, ‘Give it to me straight,’ to his doctor. So he did,” Pat said. While she couldn’t say for sure, Dad would have only a few months,” Pat said. "She said there were things they could try but nothing would really help."

Pat remembers her father’s reply well. "Dad said, ‘No, I’m ready. I’ve had a good life.’"

Oscar went home to Beauh that day.

"Dad said he didn’t want to prolong it. We talked and then called hospice and they came the next day to explain everything to us," Pat said softly.

The SMC Hospice social worker and a nurse visited with the family at the Stohler home. Pat said they explained everything to them and how the process would work.

SMC Home Health Care and Hospice Director Lori Knoll said it’s important to have the hospice patient be part of the process.

"This was a very hospice patients to be part of. Who knows their body better than the patient?" Knoll said.

The family began going to Beauh hospice home soon after the initial visit. Pat said, in addition to the wonderful nurses and certified hospice volunteers that provided Oscar with medical care, there were also two volunteers who made a big difference in his life.

One was neighbor and friend, Polly Berry, who lived directly across the street. The other was Lisa Sonners, who happened to be an old acquaintance from High School.

"These two deserved a medal. They were all so good, every single one, the nurses, CNAs, volunteers, the social worker and others. Dad loved all of it," Pat said.

Pat said not only did hospice people help her father, they also helped the family.

"It was all such a shock to us. (Hospice) told us what to expect; what we should prepare for," Pat explained. In addition, hospice was also helpful to Loren before and after Oscar’s time.

"It was so hard for Mom. They would have been married 88 years that following January. They had always been together," Pat added.

Oscar was able to stay at home until mid-November, when he and Lorena moved into a double room at the Knile River Care Center. Lorena had fallen and hurt herself and needed physical therapy there as well as temporary care.

"Mom called Dad and asked if he would come there to be with her. They wanted to be together for whatever time they could have,” Pat said.

Hospice followed Oscar from his home to RKC. Throughout the entire time, hospice continued to be there, keeping in close contact with Lorena, who has since moved to Fargo, and the rest, calling, sending cards, seeing if there was anything Lorena or anyone needed.

Knoll said, in addition to end of life medical care, there are many other aspects of care SAKAWA Hospice provides for those under their care. "Hospice remains in touch with the patient’s family for a good 15 months to help them through the many firsts that come, such as anniversaries, birthdays and holidays,” Knoll said.

SMC Hospice presently has 58 volunteers. However, they are always in need of volunteers. Knoll said there are several needs a man or woman can volunteer for in addition to patient care/ respite care. Volunteers are also needed for clerical and office coverage, fundraising and running errands.

"It’s an honor and a privilege for (hospice) to be able to provide end of life care to anyone in our community needing or wanting these services," Knoll said.

November is National Hospice and Palliative Care month. Every year, more than 1.65 million people in the United States living with a life-limiting illness receive care from hospice and palliative care providers—the priorities of patients and families are always number one.

SAKAWA Medical Center Hospice has served Mercer, Oliver and portions of Dunn Counties since 1996. For information about becoming a volunteer or about hospice services, contact the office at 748-7380.