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Battle with Cancer Brought Volunteer of the Year Janet Hitz to Houston Hospice

Newly diagnosed with cancer in 1997, Janet Hitz searched for answers. Facing the prospect of a terminal illness, she began reading several of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's books on death, dying and grief.

"Her writings touched my heart, because I had been with family members at their passing in hospitals, and it seemed to me the hospice philosophy was a better option," Hitz said. "The quiet dignity, the palliative care, the caring for not only the patient but also their family. I came to the Holcombe house, asked what I needed to do to volunteer, and Ruth Landauer latched onto me." Landauer had just begun building Houston Hospice's volunteer services program and finding someone like Hitz was the perfect fit in its early days.

For two decades, Hitz has been a warm, comforting presence for Houston Hospice as she is often seen spending time with patient families and patients around the inpatient unit: from the hallways throughout three floors, the dining and common areas to patient rooms. That dedication and commitment earned her the distinction of being named Volunteer of the Year. Hitz, still battling cancer with five recurrences, answered a few questions about her experience as a volunteer.



Have you volunteered for other organizations?

A few times here and there, but nothing felt as right as the hospice work.

How is Houston Hospice different?

It humbles me with each visit, my being allowed in the family space during such a difficult time. Working with the families and patients is a true privilege. Houston Hospice gives me hope as a future patient. That my family and myself will be taken cared of with dignity and kindness. The inpatient unit is almost sacred because so much good work is done here. The kindness that the staff extends to patients and family through some of the most difficult times of their life is so special and heartfelt. This work is a

calling. It is a different type of medicine.

What people inspire you? Why?

People who show kindness, live with integrity and honesty, people who can laugh and not take themselves too seriously. People with kind hearts. It's this kindness that touches lives and makes the world better.

Why should people volunteer?

Each of us have talents that we can donate to an organization, whether it's sweeping the floors, stocking canned goods, collecting statistics for reports, putting patient packets together, or sitting quietly with a dying patient. Organizations always need help so they can help those in need. And I believe we make our world a better place when we volunteer, the type of world I want to live in.

Her tips for getting the most out of volunteering and the perspective it provides:

Being a people person is so valuable in what we do and being a good listener. Realizing the journey is not ours it is the patient's and the family's. Volunteers who have been with Houston Hospice a while have had experiences in the medical field and we have lost loved ones. Experiences like that have shaped our perspective. We are not afraid of being around people who are at the end of life. We have empathy and sympathy for people going through these crises and not afraid to reach out. Sometimes just sitting with a family member holding their hand goes a long way in supporting them and is one of the best things we can do.

A rewarding time or experience she had as a volunteer.

I was visiting with two sisters whose mother was dying. We had several visits over time, and I felt a real connection to them. They asked lots of questions about hospice, and our inpatient facility in particular. As I was saying my goodbyes, one of the sisters thanked me and Houston Hospice for giving their mother a passing filled with excellent medical care and loving care for her and her family. Those words of gratitude are gifts that I cherish.

Hitz says her favorite springtime event in Houston is the Bayou City Arts Festival because of the families and all ages of people who attend the event. She likes how the celebratory atmosphere brings people together and where outdoor activities connect attendees to unique art experiences that showcase diverse works by visual artists from around the world. She's always fascinated by what she will see and what's produced. Her battle with cancer brought her to oil painting. "The creative process and flexibility of going in and take something from inception that you are pleased to look at is wonderful," Hitz said. "Being able to paint is therapeutic."

About Houston Hospice: Nonprofit Houston Hospice was founded in 1980 and has grown from an alternative, grass roots concept to a leader in hospice care for people of all ages and walks of life. Care is provided to patients and families in private homes and in residential facilities throughout Austin, Brazoria, Colorado, Fort Bend, Harris, Jackson, Matagorda, Montgomery, Waller and Wharton Counties. Inpatient care is provided through the Margaret Cullen Marshall Hospice Care Center located in the [Texas Medical Center](#).

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