



HOUSTON HOSPICE
Life Matters

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Photo Credit: Karla Goolsby

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From Oil Executive to Houston Hospice Volunteer

At the end of 2016 Judy Calabria faced a new event in her life that most of us encounter several times. She was leaving a job — the only job she'd ever had. Judy joined [Shell Oil Company](#) as a programmer in 1984. Her work took her to places like The Hague and Kuala Lumpur occasionally, but Houston remained home base. At the time of her retirement, she was managing people and processes related to major IT outages, disaster recovery and crisis response. Even though Shell had been her only employer, Judy wasn't leaving all of her work routine behind. Rather, she decided to engage more fully into her role as a [Houston Hospice](#) Volunteer — a position that was already vying with the oil business to define her.

Judy began volunteering at Houston Hospice in February 2009, and because of her willingness to help out in every aspect of volunteer services, she was named Houston Hospice Volunteer of the Year for 2017. Volunteer Coordinator, Elisa Covarrubias says that Judy assists with anything that needs to be done. “She delivers meals at Thanksgiving and gifts and cards to our patient families for Christmas. Every Friday she visits patients in the inpatient care unit. She has even made numerous emergency visits to be with patients who were in distress at the request of our nursing staff. Judy spends hours visiting and comforting as many patients as necessary. Truly, she does anything we ask. She visits patients, assembles and delivers Angel Bags of groceries and hygiene items for our families in need, trains new volunteers, works in the office and stocks and cleans the snack bar.”

Judy credits Shell with encouraging her volunteerism. “When I got to Shell in 1984 to start my IT career, they had a really robust volunteer program for their employees. For many years, I got involved in Veteran's Day parties at the VA Hospital, Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center Easter egg hunts, chaperoning kids to the zoo, holiday projects, fixing up homes, and many other volunteer projects that Shell offered to their employees. I liked being able to give back and help others. In the late 1990s I got away from volunteering for about 7-8 years because I was traveling internationally a lot with my Shell job. When my father passed away in 2008, I started thinking about things in my life that I missed and that made me happy. Volunteering was one of them. Both of my parents were under hospice care up in Ohio, and I really liked how hospice helped my family, so I asked the Ohio hospice for advice on how to select a hospice in Houston.”

The staff at nonprofit Valley Hospice in Ohio suggested Judy look for a nonprofit hospice in Houston. They also told her to look for specific accreditation. Houston Hospice met their criteria, so Judy signed up and applied the skills she'd learned at Shell to help hospice patients.

“At Shell, I learned the importance of truly listening to what is being said, targeting messages specifically for an audience, and not running up a ladder of inference (i.e., assuming too much too fast). At Houston Hospice, these qualities are just as important. Communications is key when volunteering at hospice; knowing when to say something to a family member, patient, or a hospice employee, and knowing what to say during difficult and sometimes emotional interactions. It's even knowing when to listen versus talk.”

Judy believes the tight deadlines at Shell taught her how to prioritize. “I prided myself on being able to juggle my work and the work of my team based on priorities. My motto when volunteering at Houston Hospice is that I'll do anything the Volunteer Coordinators ask me to do. That's why I have been so lucky to be involved in so many different activities at Houston Hospice. I look forward to continuing to help Houston Hospice in any capacity they need. I also appreciate all the Houston Hospice volunteers who do a smaller subset of hospice activities. They are just as key to making Houston Hospice such a special place.”

Judy's global experiences taught her about diversity and respecting the value that everyone brings to the table. "That has helped me a lot in working at Hospice, whether I'm talking to patients, family members, friends, or hospice employees. I'm always amazed at our similarities and our differences, and how there always seems to be a way to bond us together, even during difficult times."

People often ask Judy why she volunteers for a hospice. They assume it would be a sad experience. Judy tells them that there are some conversations that are sad, but there are opportunities to smile and help people in ways that she would not have imagined. "I don't sing, but one day I was asked to hum Christmas carols to a patient. I was amazed at the calming effect my humming had on the patient. Once I sat with a gentleman who was alert but rarely spoke or responded to anyone. I was telling him a little about me, and how lucky I was to have been able to see and do things I never imagined. He actually spoke to me and even held my hand."

Volunteers are an integral part of nonprofit Houston Hospice's team; serving patients and families with caring expertise. To learn more about volunteering at Houston Hospice, call 713-467-7423 or visit www.houstonhospice.org.

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 customized for people of all ages and walks of life. Teams of experts provide medical, emotional and spiritual care to patients and families throughout Houston and 10 surrounding counties. Services are provided in private homes, assisted living communities, and in their inpatient care facility located in the [Texas Medical Center](#).

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