

Hospice and Palliative Medicine Visionary Sister Mary Giovanni Shares Her Insights on the Field

In celebration of 25 years serving the profession, the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine (AAHPM) asked its 5,000 members to nominate who they think are the leaders – or Visionaries – in the field. They then asked members to vote for the top 10 among the 111 nominated.

"This program recognizes key individuals who have been critical in building and shaping our field over the past 25 years," noted Steve R. Smith, AAHPM executive director and CEO. "These individuals represent thousands of other healthcare professionals in this country that provide quality medical care and support for those living with serious illness — each and every day."

The Visionaries – 14 women and 16 men – are physicians, nurses and hospice pioneers such as British physician, nurse and social worker Cicely Saunders, credited with starting the modern hospice movement, and Elisabeth Kübler Ross, author of numerous books including the groundbreaking "On Death and Dying." Five elected officials were nominated and one of them, former President Ronald Reagan, was named a Visionary for signing into law the Medicare hospice benefit in 1982.

Many of the visionaries will be sharing their thoughts about the field and who inspired their work. We'll be posting them over the next several months. Today's post is from Sister Mary Giovanni, RN, founder, president and CEO, Angela Hospice in Livonia, MI.

Who has most influenced your work and what impact has he or she had?

I see my work as following along a path that God set for me. It is a series of experiences that has led me to where I am today, humbling accepting the title "Visionary."

Initially it was my parents who influenced me and led me to a life of service. They each had the gift of giving to others. Even my mother, while raising all 12 of us children, found time to help others. Whenever neighbors were in need – whether it was mother cooking something for them, or my father building something for them – it was just something quietly done. I feel that was where I got my gift of service.

When I began my vocation as a Felician Sister, I was working in the infirmary where we cared for ill and elderly Sisters. I couldn't help but notice the vast difference in the way we cared for dying Sisters in the infirmary, compared to the way dying patients were cared for in a hospital setting. In the hospital, dying patients were isolated at the end of the wing, where they were treated quietly until they died. I wished that all people could have the compassionate, holistic care that we provided for the Sisters.

When I saw Dame Cicely Saunders speak in 1974, I saw the answer of how to care for the dying. I knew we needed this beautiful care for lay people here in the United States. So Dr. Saunders also had a tremendous impact on me.

What does it mean to you to be named a "Visionary" in Hospice and Palliative Medicine?

It is an honor, and also very humbling to be named a Visionary. But I feel that I really must share this honor with all of the wonderful people who have worked alongside me over these 30 years. The caring and compassion I see in my staff and our volunteers continue to inspire me to this day. And I also must credit my fellow Felician Sisters who have believed in this mission and given me the resources and opportunities needed to carry out this work.

The success of Angela Hospice has certainly been a story of cooperation, and shared passion for helping others, and I know that none of this could have happened without the help of these dedicated colleagues and friends.

What is your vision for the future of hospice and Palliative Medicine?

I think that as more families experience the benefits of these compassionate programs, we will see a better understanding of the hospice concept as a whole out in the community. This is something I've already noticed with young people who have seen hospice help a grandparent or other family member. They have an appreciation for the compassion and caring of this work, which I believe begins to overcome the fear.

It is understandable that people don't want to think about death or losing a loved one. But we know that it is important that people do know about what hospice has to offer, so that when we can be of help, they won't hesitate to make that decision.

We hear from families time and time again saying they wish they had called us sooner. We can provide so much help, relief, and comfort to our patients and their families. The sooner they call us, the sooner we are able to provide that assistance, so the patient and their families can benefit more from these services. In this way, my vision for the future is greater comfort for more patients and the people that love them.

More information on the Visionaries project, including the list of 30 Visionaries is on the Academy's website www.aahpm.org.

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