

## Jimmy Carter and the blessings of hospice

By Kathleen Vallee Stein

As 98-year-old President Jimmy Carter rests in hospice care, these memories are with me:

My dad was lying on a gurney, prepped for surgery. I sat next to him on a small stool a nurse gave me. He was in one of those skimpy hospital gowns, wearing a shower cap to cover his wispy gray hair, and covered with two blankets because surgery suites are always freezing.

There were complications with the surgery before him, so Dad was parked in the hallway to wait. I volunteered to sit with him. We did what we always do in our family when we were scared - we cracked jokes.

“Hey, Dad, do you think the doctor made a mistake and had to fix it?” I asked.

“Could be,” he speculated, “Or they lost a sponge and are looking for it. Or maybe he was late getting here from the golf course.”

Eventually, Dad was wheeled into the operating room, and I returned to the waiting room to join Mom and my sister, Anne. The surgeon came out a few hours later, took us into the consultation room, and gave us good news. Dad had Stage II colon cancer and the surgeon removed seven inches of his colon. The doctor was confident he got it all.

That was twenty-five years ago. At that time, Dad was 78, and I was 48. He recovered from colon cancer but succumbed to non-Hodgkin's lymphoma two years later. Now I am in my seventies and dealing with the medical challenges aging inflicts on those lucky enough to have a long life.

Mom and Dad had numerous surgeries, illnesses, and chronic conditions during the last ten years of their lives. Anne and I worked as a team to support our parents.

The biggest challenge in caregiving is facing the unknown. Just like new parents take

their newborn baby home with no clue of how to raise a child, an adult child steps up to care for her parents and crosses all kinds of boundaries that have been as impenetrable as a prison wall.

My family softened the blow of breaking taboos, as our parents grew weak and vulnerable, through humor. Lots of humor. It becomes one of those situations where if you don't laugh, you'll cry. In our family, we laughed together. We cried alone.

I remember the night Dad returned from the hospital after he went into Hospice care. We had faced the fact that he was dying, a gut-wrenching experience. I never expected that going on hospice care would release us from the tyranny of the medical establishment with its mission of curing at all costs. We were at peace.

My parents had an apartment in a retirement community. One night before dinner, I was trying to get Dad from the hospice-provided hospital bed into a wheelchair so he could eat dinner in the kitchen. A home health care aide had shown me how to give him a "bear hug" to help him maneuver from the bed to the chair.

He was very weak and went limp as I tried to swing his lower body around to get his rear end into the chair. He wasn't strong enough to make a move and ended up on the floor between the chair and the bed. I gasped as he slumped over and slid down, terrified that I had hurt him. I knelt down so I could see his face.

"We've gotta get me in the chair," he said, "It's Happy Hour. I want a martini."

I bent down and lifted Dad under the arms in a modified bear hug and pulled him toward the wheelchair. He had enough strength in his legs to push as I pulled, both of us grunting with the effort. Finally, Dad got situated in the chair. I tugged at his cotton robe to protect his privacy, adjusted his oxygen tubing and wheeled him off to the kitchen.

The kitchen staff arrived with our meals while I made Dad's martini. Then Mom, Dad, and I raised our glasses. We toasted - welcome home! We had twenty-nine days together before Dad passed from this life peacefully in his sleep. Life shrinks down when a parent faces mortality, but in that small, sacred space, it can be beautiful beyond anything you might imagine.