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Greensburg hospice adds 'death doulas' to its services

LYDIA NUZUM
Reporter
Pittsburgh Business Times

When her father died in 2015, Elizabeth Aungier's own employees were there to care for him, but she remembers feeling overwhelmed at the reality of letting him go.

"I really believe the dying process can be a beautiful experience if families and patients have the right support to assist them through it," she said. "I was on a mission after my father passed away; it really opened my eyes. He received wonderful medical intervention for pain and symptom management, but I found myself reaching out to a friend who was a hospice nurse for that extra support when I became a little overwhelmed, and I looked at her at one point and thought, 'she reminds me of a midwife, but at the end of a journey instead of the beginning.'"

Aungier has worked in long-term and end-of-life care for decades, and she opened Promise Hospice LLC in 2010, but her experience after her father's death led her to a newer trend that has taken root in the field – end-of-life doulas, or "death doulas," trained providers who offer emotional, social, spiritual and physical support for dying patients and their families. The term "doula" is borrowed from the more longstanding profession that assists midwives and other health care providers during childbirth, and Aungier said the idea of providing support beyond a traditional hospice experience drove her to incor-



porate it into her own company.

"When I was researching, I realized there was this end-of-life doula movement starting to happen across the country and gaining momentum in areas like New York and California," she said.

Aungier soon connected with Suzanne O'Brian, who runs a certified end-of-life doula program in New York called Doulagivers, and who was able to provide doula training for the majority of Promise Hospice's 24 employees. Aungier herself has become certified and is now able to provide the training – in fact, Aungier has planned a free Level

1 EOL doula training in Greensburg on Sept. 10.

"Hospice is a medical model; they provide a skilled service, with nurses who provide care and pain management, medication management, social workers who provide counseling, but it is a skilled service," she said. "The end-of-life doula is trained to approach someone holistically and to treat the whole person, and to know what to do for them physically, emotionally and spiritually as someone's body declines. They can help with end-of-life rituals – maybe the person wants to spend time writing letters to their family members for the future, or creating a 'life review' and putting it in a journal; maybe they want someone who can sit with them when they're worried. Because they're non-medical, the doulas can offer families support beyond medical management."

Aungier said she believes the EOL doula component of The Promise Group, called PromiseCare Doulas, is a first of its kind for the region. It is available to patients in Allegheny, Westmoreland, Fayette and Washington counties.

"I think the area is really ready for this, and I think that's why it resonated with me so much," she said. "When I saw what was popping up in different states, I thought 'wow, this is something our families and even our health care professionals are looking for.'"

To participate in Promise's level 1 doula training, to be held at its office at 121 North Main Street on Sept. 10, please call 724-515-5251 or email eaungier@promisehospice.com.