



■ Elsa Ceccato in her home with her daughter, Ann Noel.

‘THEY’RE ANGELS’

ELSA, LONGTIME MEMBER OF HOLY ROSARY

PARISH IN WOODLAND, IS GRATEFUL FOR ALL

INVOLVED WITH HER HOSPICE CARE ✝

BY LYNETTE MAGNINO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE GERMAN

ON A TORRID mid-summer afternoon, after a dire emergency room experience, Elsa Ceccato sits comfortably in her living room, celebrating her hospice care team as nothing less than “a breath of fresh air.” She cannot fathom spending the end of her life without them or anywhere other than in the comfort of her home in Woodland.

YOUR STORIES MY STORY

Days earlier, excruciating pain and extreme symptoms almost derailed that plan when she found herself within minutes

from hospital admission, even though she sought only to alleviate her escalated pain level with a simple procedure. The

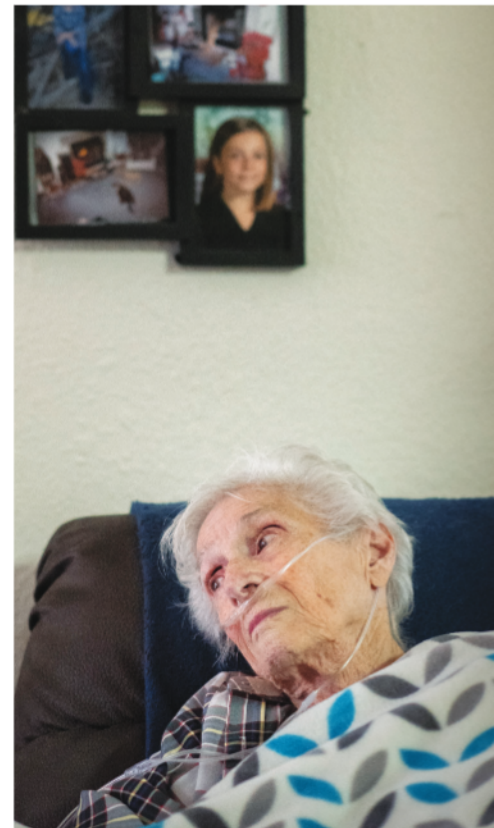
spiral scene soon caused the ER professionals to call for an IV to be started in her arm. As a hospice patient, Elsa knew that if she were admitted, she would forfeit her hospice care and re-enter the health care system for total care management.

As her daughter Ann Noel rushed down Interstate 5 from the northernmost reaches of California that day, over the phone she coordinated with her son, Jay, and daughter-in-law, Kristen, also of Woodland. She called Mercy Hospice and time blurred.

“We were in a panic,” Ann admits, but now her easy smile signaled that relief soon followed that day. “The Lord just totally took control,” she recounts, detailing how one of Elsa’s palliative care nurses was onsite at Woodland Memorial for a meeting and gladly interceded to explain Elsa’s case.



■ **Patty Zavala, hospice nurse, visits with Elsa Ceccato in her home in Woodland. Elsa's daughter brought her Westie named Heidi to visit.**



Ann also shares how “Kristen comforted mom and told her, ‘you’re going to be OK and we’re going to get you home; you’re not losing hospice.’” Kristen, who had become a regular and authorized voice in Elsa’s care whispered encouraging words to Elsa suggesting that a small dose of hospice-prescribed morphine would ease her pain.

“They’re angels,” Ann says, and Elsa chimes in, “I have a lot of angels.” She refers to the small group of professionals assigned to her care who deliver personalized services and assistance via Dignity Health’s Mercy Hospice and Home Palliative Care Services program, which aids terminally ill individuals with a prognosis of six months or less to live.

“If I’m going to go, it’s going to be in my bed, at home,” Elsa insists, depleted of energy and missing her independence, but confident and faith filled. “When He’s ready for me, I’ll be here,” she nods ever sure of God’s will unfolding in her life.

“She has always known she wanted to die at home,” Ann interjects, sharing how her mom “always told us, for many years and long before she was even sick” that she rejected the idea of a convalescent home or any care facility.

PATHWAY TO HOSPICE CARE

Elsa’s journey to hospice care began about two years ago when her illness subtly made itself known. A cancer specialist ordered MRIs every three months, but results were always inconclusive. With an array of uncomfortable symptoms developing, her physician, Jean Kareofelas with Woodland Healthcare, determined Elsa had been living with liver disease for quite a long time possibly, since birth.

By June of this year, Elsa, 82, learned the final stages of her disease had begun. Having received care at Woodland Memorial Hospital, Elsa and Ann were encouraged by “Dr. Jean” to consider palliative care, which

was newly available in Woodland through Mercy Hospice and Home Palliative Care Services. Elsa required more care than her periodic doctor visits, and the palliative care program allowed nurses to come to her home, monitor her care, and keep her connected with her doctors.

“Mom has such a rapport with her nurses,” Ann explains, indicating how important it was for Elsa to continue with her care team even while at home. Dr. Jean also cited the ease at which Elsa could transition to Mercy Hospice when necessary.

“Hospice is appropriate if the patient is within six months of dying,” Ann says, distinguishing hospice from palliative care and how the level of care increases to almost daily visits.

Elsa moved to hospice care by the end of July.

“We knew things were evolving and changing,” Ann expresses with acceptance and gratitude. “Once you’re on hospice care, they prescribe everything that they think you may need

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and connect the patient and family with services,” she adds, visibly pleased to relinquish the worries and stress to hospice professionals in favor of enjoying time with her mother.

The unfortunate mid-August ER visit confirmed Elsa’s wish for the comfort of hospice at home. Ann reflects on their frenzied three-month journey, not really knowing “how this happened” that they should be so blessed to have transitioned to hospice care, surrounded by a dear and valued care team, with peace of mind and unwavering faith. Once again, Elsa chimes in recognizing God’s handiwork and says, “I do.”

ABIDING FAITH

Through it all, Elsa’s faith remains central to her everyday life. She quips that she’s been a parishioner of Holy Rosary Parish in Woodland “since forever,” recalling her move to the town in 1960. Ann was just starting kindergarten with younger brother Steven not too far behind. Elsa remembers many of the pastors that have served over nearly 60 years and laughs heartily as she shares fond memories and dear friendships.

“It’s what I miss the most; not being able to go to church,” Elsa concedes.

Elsa’s phone is nearby. She looks forward to her “pew buddies” calling to check in. Ann shares “they all sat together in church” and their friendship continues, bridging this life with the next, and confirming the promises of faith. Cards and mementos fill her bookshelves and family photos adorn her walls.

Elsa looks forward to the visits from eucharistic ministers who bring her Communion. Parishioner Julianne Moren visits on Wednesdays and Saturdays before the vigil Mass.

“She brings me Communion, my bulletin and messages from my priest,” Elsa says, thinking

fondly of her parish community and pastor, Father Jonathan Molina. “She would come every day if I asked her,” Elsa adds, visibly moved as she considers the importance of Julianne’s visits. She shares how she turns to the Lord’s Prayer for comfort upon receiving Communion and tells how “it’s my favorite.”

Across the room, Ann, too, contemplates those special, faith-filled moments. “It’s huge,” she says, with uncontained appreciation for moments when

grandchildren visit and witness Elsa’s deep faith as she receives Communion and prays.

“They see her strength and the importance of her faith,” Ann says, realizing perhaps for the first time how “it resonates with them; they see how she is a woman of faith.”

Patricia Zavala, certified hospice and palliative nurse, journeys with Elsa during her hospice experience and also shares her Catholic faith. A Holy Rosary parishioner since 1990, Patty wonders if she may

A CLOSER LOOK: Mercy Hospice and Home Palliative Care Services

Dignity Health offers an array of interdisciplinary services licensed under Mercy Hospice and aligned with Dignity Health’s mission “to furthering the healing ministry of Jesus,” according to Cherie Sianez, RN, manager of Mercy Hospice and Home Palliative Care Services.

A patient’s “core team” consists of a hospice nurse, social worker, hospice home aide, and a chaplain, in addition to the medical expertise of an on-staff medical director. Ancillary team members may include a dietician or a physical therapist also. Mercy Hospice’s history dates to 1979 and is Medicare/MediCal certified. Some private insurances also cover hospice and home health programs as do veterans’ benefits.

Depending on a patient’s needs, Mercy Hospice determines and adjusts care levels as required, ensuring nursing care, 24/7/365 phone support, medications, equipment and supplies. Hospice care requires a doctor’s certification of terminal illness and a prognosis of six months or less. Comfort care or symptom care replaces aggressive care. Conversely, palliative care may continue for an unspecified time period and typically requires less services.

Beyond patient care, Mercy Hospice also delivers additional programs that aid families:

- **Bereavement services:** Counseling and support for family members up to 13 months after a loved one’s death. Telephone support is also available for those who live far away.
- **Annual celebration of life:** A memorial event sponsored by the chaplaincy department to reconnect families with care teams as they honor the memory of their loved one.
- **SOUL program:** The Source of Unconditional Love (SOUL) program is an animal-assisted therapy program that brings therapy animals into the home. The animals offer joy and relaxation to patients and families in often-overwhelming situations.
- **Volunteer services:** Invites volunteers to “give comfort, peace and care to patients, caregivers and families during the end of life journey.” Volunteers apply, undergo review and screening, and participate in training. †



FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT MERCY HOSPICE AT 916-281-3900 OR VISIT WWW.DIGNITYHEALTH.ORG/SACRAMENTO/SERVICES/HOME-HEALTH-AND-HOSPICE.



■ Patty checks Elsa's vital signs during her visit.



■ Patty Zavala leaves Elsa's home after providing medical care and visiting.

“ Unlike any other part of health care, when we're facing the end of our lives we come right up against the Divine. It's an honor for me to share that time of life with people of any faith and especially when it's my own religion. ”

Patricia Zavala

have even seen Elsa at church before their worlds merged. Regardless, the bond of their faith strengthens and enriches Patty's visits.

“Unlike any other part of health care, when we're facing the end of our lives we come right up against the Divine,” Patty contemplates, pleased to be a part of it. “It's an honor for me to share that time of life with people of any faith and especially when it's my own religion,” she adds. She reveals how her role as a hospice nurse supports the range of feelings and spiritual complexities that accompany death and how “these emotions and sensitivities are just as important as the physical things that we help with.”

“There's just a lot of spiritual angst around dying,” Patty notes, having experienced this truth over an entire career of frontline exposure to these powerful end-of-life moments. “Faith may be way, way, way back, or maybe a person hasn't been to church or isn't particularly religious, and all of a sudden it's very important,” she confirms, emphasizing how the entire hospice care program

walks with the patient and family responding to the spiritual and physical dimensions of care needs.

“Hospice caters to a family's faith practice,” Ann says, thankful for how the team “moves with you.” She explains how all their care professionals know “we are open about our Catholic faith and talk about it...when they step into your house, they're in your world.”

PARTNERS IN CARE

Elsa's hospice team includes up to six professionals committed to a well-coordinated, sensitive and responsive approach to her care.

“We're doing everything we can to make Elsa comfortable, have her family help her, and give her time alone if she wants it,” Patty stresses. “It's important for us to meet these kinds of stated preferences for people as best we can.”

Patty and her colleagues

rotate visits and attend to Elsa's medical needs. A social worker also visits to create the caregiving plan, define resources, and offer counseling services as needed. A home hospice aide assures Elsa's personal care, and a non-denominational chaplain facilitates spiritual and practical needs, coordinating with a patient's church and ensuring funeral planning.

“I can't give less than 100 percent,” Patty promises, because “these are people who are dying.”

She thinks about one of her greatest challenges. “I never know when I leave the house...,” she pauses and continues, “I say goodbye in my mind every time because I don't know if I'll ever see her again.”

Elsa smiles with contentment. Her eyes are heavy as she considers a nap, but she repeats again, “angels... the Lord provides.” †

EDITOR'S NOTE: Elsa Ceccato died in her home in Woodland on Sept. 27, surrounded by her family members.