# Cedar Valley Hospice celebrates 40 years

## A Journey to Serve Our Community

## By Stephanie Abel-Hohenzy

Everything that has meaning and purpose starts with a great idea. In 1978, Virginia Bisbee of Cedar Falls, who had cared for a dying relative but found an inadequate support system, began researching the hospice movement. Only four years earlier, the first hospice program opened in the United States in Connecticut.

Bisbee knew that with support, she could bring new hope to families traveling through life’s final stages. She hit the ground running, first contacting Dr. Robert Guthrie, a brilliant doctor of radiology, who would later go on to design and open the first Cancer Treatment Center in Waterloo. He too believed in the hospice concept, and soon, a circle of grassroots volunteers began to form - including Karol Rae Hoth, an avid community volunteer who was the leadership director of Junior League at the time.

“They needed to introduce the concept to the area and to the state, so they asked me to head up the effort and bring a symposium to the University of Northern Iowa (UNI),” said Hoth. “Nobody had 24-hour nursing care in the home at the time and nobody wanted to take on that duty - which is critical component of hospice care. So we went to work.”

A committee was developed to research what was being done around the country and establish standards. Soon, a program of care rubric was laid out. “I was adamant about not having a program ready until we had all the standards in place,” added Hoth.

In May 1979, the committee brought in hospice experts from all over the country to speak at an all-day seminar at UNI. The symposium was a success. Cedar Valley Hospice was incorporated, and on July 19, 1979, its first meeting was held with community volunteers who wanted to help build the organization. In September, Hoth was named the first Cedar Valley Hospice Board of Directors President in Waterloo.

By January 1980, Cedar Valley Hospice had a trained hospice team and admitted their first patient. It was unchartered territory for all, with only one part-time paid employee, Evelyn Szary, who acted as the nurse and patient care coordinator.

“The rest of us were trained, passionate volunteers and had studied every possible base we could before we began,” said Hoth. “We had to educate on every component to the hospitals, doctors, religious members, funeral directors...basically wherever we could gather a group of people, we did.”

Meanwhile, in Independence, Dorothy Burkhart was beginning her own hospice movement. It was 1982, and she was a mother on a mission to start a local hospice after she watched her adult daughter, Lynn, suffer with breast cancer. She, like Bisbee, didn’t want another family to have to journey through a serious illness alone. Burkhart knocked on doors asking for donations and enlisted the help of friends to gather support in the community.

Her son, Brooks, recalls how “fired up” she was during this time. “She went right to the town’s prominent family physicians, Dr. Myers and Dr. Mochal, and their wives and said flat out, ‘We are going to start a hospice.’ When my mother asked for something, you didn’t turn her down,” said Brooks.

Soon, a board of directors was formed including both doctors, Dick and Kitty Myers and Burkhart. Thanks also to Bob Richards, the administrator at People’s Memorial Hospital at the time, an office space was opened for the endeavor. A coordinator was hired in 1983 and the first training program took place in 1984. One year later, the organization cared for its first patient. It was these community pioneers that started Buchanan County Hospice – which would later become Cedar Valley Hospice.

Back in Waterloo, the Friends of Cedar Valley Hospice Committee was established to help raise funds to operate because there was no hospice benefit for people with Medicare, Medicaid or private insurances.

Former Board President Tom Langlas, retired Waterloo lawyer, remembers meeting with founding members often during weekly lunch hours and monthly after work to keep building the organization. He pinpoints becoming Medicare certified in 1985 as groundbreaking for the organization.

“We all were writing letters to the government and trying to demonstrate that our staff could potentially help more people,” he said.

For Langlas, the real “magic” began to happen when word of mouth spread that Cedar Valley Hospice was helping patients and their families. “People began to see that there’s another aspect to living until you die,”

By this time, Waterloo had hired their first full-time director, Cheryl Hoerner, to keep forging the organization forward. With the reimbursement system in place, the organization went from a donor-based revenue stream with a $100,000 budget to a million-dollar operation in the late 80s.

Everyone’s hard work was finally paying off and the goal of serving more people was a reality. It also increased the need for more space and staff. By 1989, Cedar Valley Hospice had served over 150 patients and families, had a paid staff of 15 and maintained a volunteer roster of over 60.

In 1992, Hospice of Buchannan County and Grundy County Hospice merged with Cedar Valley Hospice. That same year, Drs. Myer and Mochal stepped up again, donating their office building on First Street East, where Cedar Valley Hospice still resides. Thousands have been served locally, including Dorothy’s husband, Dwight, in 1996, and Dorothy, who passed away on Sept. 2, 2015 at the age of 99.

In 40 years, the offices of Cedar Valley Hospice have served more than 20,000 hospice patients and their families and thousands more through its other programs. It also has a paid staff of 120 employees and 400 volunteers.

Throughout all four decades, major accomplishments and additions have set the stage for unprecedented growth and support. Undoubtedly, the most important factor in these accomplishments is the organization’s commitment to never lose sight of the goals and the passion that once sparked communities of believers.

**CEDAR VALLEY HOSPICE TIMELINE:**

**1978:**Community members come together to start a local hospice.

**1979:**Cedar Valley Hospice is incorporated.  
**1980:**First patient is admitted to Cedar Valley Hospice; non-profit status 501(c)(3) granted.  
**1981:**Friends of Cedar Valley Hospice was formed to help the organization with fundraising.

**1982:**An agreement with Schoitz Medical Center results in the opening of a 6-bed inpatient unit.  
**1985:**Cedar Valley Hospice becomes one of the first 12 hospices in the nation to gain Medicare certification.  
**1988:** Cedar AIDS Support System (CASS) opens to provide medical case management and support to those with HIV or AIDS.  
**1992:**Hospice of Buchannan County (Independence) and Grundy County Hospice merge with Cedar Valley Hospice.  
**1994:**Eucalyptus Tree program begins to help counsel youth through the grieving process.  
**1998:**Bremer-Butler Hospice (Waverly) merges with Cedar Valley Hospice.  
**1999:**Renovations begin to establish the Cedar Valley Hospice Home in Waterloo.  
**2000:**Hospice Home opens its doors. The first patient to be served there fittingly was Virginia Bisbee, the original founding member of Cedar Valley Hospice.  
**2004:**Cedar Valley Hospice celebrates its 25th anniversary.  
**2005:**LINK Palliative Care Program begins to help those with life-limiting illnesses that aren’t eligible or ready for hospice.  
**2006:**Cedar Valley Hospice is one of 200 hospices (out of 3300 hospices) identified as a Quality Partner by the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization. Music therapy becomes a part of the hospice care program.  
**2009:**Selected by NHPCO as one of 32 hospices in the country for a pilot program – Caring Connections  – which aims to address employer/employee needs regarding care giving, end-of-life care and grief.  
**2011:**Cedar Valley Hospice joins the We Honor Veterans program.  
**2014:**Capital campaign begins to renovate the Hospice Home. Cedar Valley Hospice marks its 35th anniversary.

**2015:** A complete update of the Hospice Home marks the home’s 15th anniversary.  
**2018:** Logo is refreshed and modernized and new branding standards are adopted. CASS program marks 30 years of helping those with HIV or AIDS.  
**2019:** A new mission statement is revealed to mark 40th anniversary. Waterloo and Independence offices undergo office remodels.

**PHOTO CAPTIONS:**

Founders group: *In October, past and current Board of Directors Members along with key players in Cedar Valley Hospice’s history gathered to make a video to celebrate the organization’s 40th anniversary. The video can be seen at cvhospice.org. Pictured: Anne Nass, first Executive Director Cheryl Hoerner, Steve Jordan, Kathy and Tom Langlas, second Executive Director Marvin Fagerlind, Dan Brobst, Jeff Halversen, Chris Schildroth, current Executive Director Michaela Vandersee and 2018 Board President Nancy Weber.*

In December 2015, Cedar Valley Hospice paid a special tribute to longtime supporter and the founder of the first hospice in Independence, Dorothy Burkhart. Members of her family, along with several of the community members who played a key role creating the local hospice and fostering its success, came for the dedication. Dorothy’s plaque, which is posted in the Independence office, recognizes her for her efforts, service and devotion to the Cedar Valley Hospice mission. Front: Family members Rick Deines, Brooks Burkhart Jr., Brooks Burkhart Sr. and Hildegard Burkhart. Back: Longtime friends and supporters Kate Risk, Kitty Myers, Cedar Valley Hospice Board of Directors member and pastor John Hougen and former hospital administrator Bob Richards.

Dorothy Burkhart died in September of 2015, and her husband, Dwight, in 1996, leaving a long legacy of support for hospice care. Back in the early 80s, she inspired the community to stand behind her grassroots effort so that no family had to be alone at the end of a loved one’s journey and throughout their bereavement.

Headshot – Karol Rae Hoth