

40 STORIES IN 40 YEARS

Carita Clancy



Carita Clancy's interest in palliative care is a deeply personal one. The Ballarat Hospice Inc. Chief Executive Officer (CEO) has been working in the health field since 1976, but it was her own encounters with life that influenced her nursing career.

"I've always had an interest in caring for people who are at the end of their life. My father died when I was one year old and I spent the last three months of his life visiting him while in hospital where he died. I also had a sister who died tragically when she was just a little girl. My mother taught me about compassion,

resilience and continuing bonds; just because someone has died, they don't disappear from your life and from who you become."

These early experiences allowed Carita to be comfortable with death and dying, but it was an experience when she was 19 and a student nurse that alerted her to the isolation in dying. "I was nursing a person who was dying on an acute ward. Her death was lonely; I wasn't sure of what was happening but I was sure that it wasn't the right care or the right way to die but I didn't know why. That led me to want to do more to help people have a good death."

After Carita finished her nursing training in a large hospital, she worked at Mt Olivet, Brisbane. "At that time (1979) it had a reputation of place where *old people go to die*." It taught Carita the value of life, dignity of death and the spiritual side of dying. Carita travelled overseas and found herself working in the Radiotherapy Oncology Department at St Thomas's Hospital in London. It was another learning opportunity for Carita.

After returning to Australia, Carita was fortunate to be accepted into the Oncology Nursing course at Peter Mac Callum Cancer Centre; then situated on Little Lonsdale Street. On course completion she continued to work at Peter Mac in different roles for nine and a half years before moving to the country.

A role advertised to develop community palliative care in the central part of the Grampians region was the ideal opportunity for Carita. She stayed in the position for nine years developing a service with the support of Ballarat Hospice Care and Wimmera Hospice Care; receiving guidance from Heather Robinson and Anne Lane (nee Hayes).

“It was all new, living in the country, working in the community, developing a service from a job description, going through the tendering process which brought services in the Grampians Region closer together with all delivering consistent messages about palliative care and more...”

“I wasn’t sure I could be a palliative care nurse for the rest of my days, so I chose to find a role where I could influence change and improve palliative care; contribute to the conversation around death being a part of life and how can we improve the way we care for our society. “

Carita undertook a Masters of Management and moved into Aged Care where the palliative approach made sense to her. “Life takes you on a journey; one door closes another opens and I took on the CEO role at Ballarat Hospice Care Inc. in 2007.”

Ballarat Hospice Care Inc. is a not-for-profit palliative care service created by the community, for the community in 1985. History plays a significant role and Ballarat Hospice Care has always been a lead in the development of palliative care with the support of many significant “pioneers”. These include Dr David Brumley, Dr Adri Van de Kniffe and many GPs and board members from the community. Ballarat Hospice Care never forgets where it has come from and continues to have a strong community connection.

“The highlight is every day. I am grateful for the gift that people give us, every day...”

Having worked in the sector for many years, Carita has seen many changes. In her eyes, one of the most positive changes has been how symptoms are managed and treated with a more targeted approach. She also noted the community is more open to discussing palliative and end of life care resulting in a stronger sense of self determination on how people want their care to be.

“Clinical staff are now able to define the cause of pain and give appropriate treatment. This wasn’t as common in the beginning; while I think the modern view of palliative care is at risk of becoming more medicalised, this is one element that has changed for the better. We must never forget the spiritual and deep meaning caring for someone preparing for the end of life gives to each and every one of us, if we take time to look and listen. “

Carita noted “The slow increase of funding across the years has also been a positive change and has allowed us to continue to develop and offer quality palliative care.” She reflected on Palliative Care Victoria and the large and positive impact it has made within the industry.

“Palliative Care Victoria has worked hard at keeping their services and members together. We used to go down once a month to meet. While it hasn’t happened for a while due to COVID19, it was a place for peer support, learning and ideas.”

Finally, when asked about highlights of working in the sector, Carita said ‘each day is a highlight’.

“I am grateful to work alongside the staff at Ballarat Hospice Care. They constantly show compassion and kindness and are always present with the people they care for. I am grateful we have an effective Board, the support of the wider community and health services who work with us to get the best outcomes.”

“I am grateful for the gift that people give us in allowing us to care for them; they keep giving until the last moment of their life and it’s a privilege to be a part of that.”

