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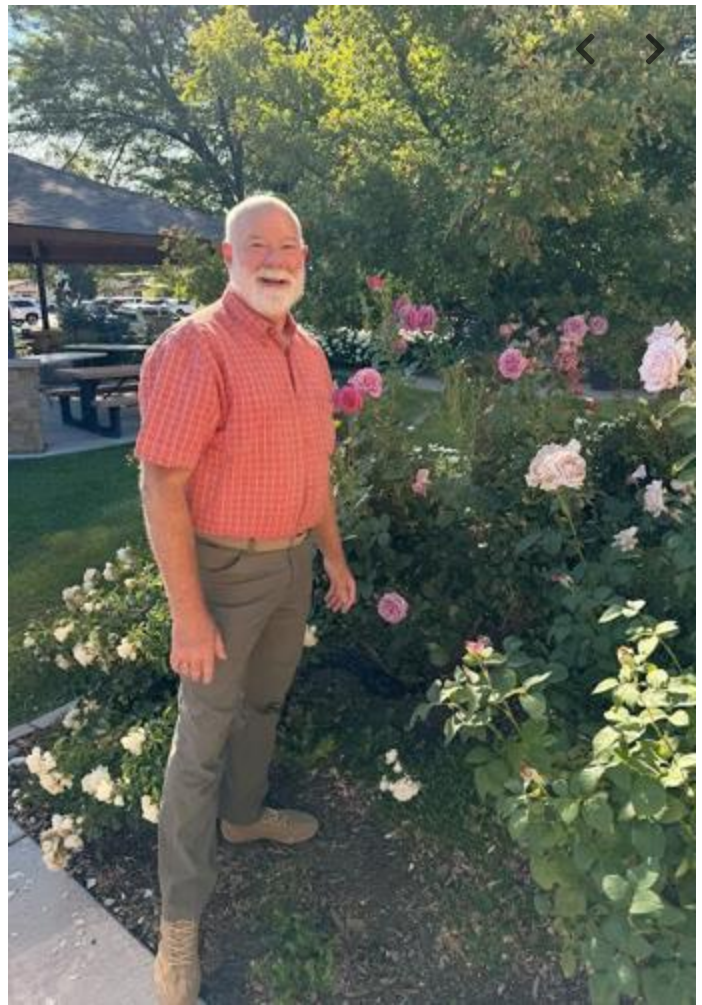
FEATURED

Dignity, not dollars: Thompson reflects on HopeWest's role in community as he retires

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1 of 2



Kelly Thompson stands in the garden at HopeWest's Montrose location. He is retiring as the hospice service's program director after 12 years

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Gift this article

Kelly Thompson never expected to finish his working life at a service providing hospice and palliative care, with other supportive services.

When the Grand Junction native returned to the area by moving to Montrose from Lakewood 28 years ago, he had been a horticulturist. Here, he taught at Northside and Pomona elementary schools after earning certification at CMU-Montrose. Thompson was set. Then along came his “10-year itch,” and an opportunity at HopeWest’s Heirlooms for Hospice store in Montrose. Thompson rose to the manager’s position and later, became the care organization’s volunteer coordinator.

“I loved that position,” Thompson said.

Not bad for someone who, upon beginning with HopeWest says he barely knew what the word “hospice” meant.

His life’s path turned again when HopeWest’s program director announced her retirement — and approached him about putting in for the position.

“I think I guffawed at her ... thinking it was a joke. She was a nurse, I had no clinical background,” Thompson recounted June 23, shortly after a staff party in Montrose honoring his since-lengthy tenure as the program director. As it happened, a clinical background wasn’t a necessity for the role. Thompson, who had agreed to give it a try on an interim basis, wound up serving for 12 years.

He departs in July for retirement. There’s his 99-year-old mother, Dot, to consider, plus projects at home, and his garden, which Thompson called “my therapist.” He will continue, in retirement, as Montrose Methodist Church’s director of Music Ministries. Plus, he will be back to support HopeWest in other ways, including at its annual fundraising gala.

HopeWest serves Montrose, Delta, Mesa, Ouray, Garfield and Rio Blanco counties. The organization first began providing services in Montrose and Delta in 1995, through what then was called Hospice of the Uncompahgre Valley. HopeWest's current name reflects an expansion in its services beyond hospice care.

In addition to its Grand Junction Ferris Hospice Care Center, which provides a dignified, first-class final home for terminally ill patients, HopeWest operates administratively at the Montrose Center for Hope, 425 S. Fourth Street, which

opened in 2016. HopeWest's programs have grown over the years to include bereavement support, dementia support, and PACE (Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly).

"When you surround yourself with great people, that's all you need. If you let people soar ... they will bend over backwards and do cartwheels. I have never focused on attaining the brass ring, whatever that looks like. ... It's the best job experience I've ever had," Thompson said.

"We're neighbors caring for neighbors. You really fostered that and the whole organization felt that," said Jenni Neil, HopeWest regional vice president of operations. She will be taking on some of Thompson's duties and HopeWest is hiring a director of regional donations, as well as a regional outreach coordinator.

"As an organization, we serve the entire Western Slope. There's just something with that community we get to feel as an organization. We're not just alone here in Montrose. We are connected to HopeWest and all that supports that organization, which of course, is made up of our communities lacrosse the Western Slope. It's such an honor to get to meet people in their communities and connect them to the organization and all the wonderful things they do — people just like Kelly," Neil added.

Thompson devotes time to helping the communities understand why HopeWest is here and what hospice really is. "We're not for that last week of life. If we could overcome that belief, we would be better off," Thompson said, acknowledging that inaccurate perceptions persist.

"My own dad (Fred) had that feeling," he shared. Thompson tried speaking with his father about bringing in a nurse from HopeWest for palliative care.

"He said, 'I don't want those people in my home.' That told me right there that he thought, 'Oh, you only call hospice when it's Monday and it's obvious you're not going to be on this earth on Friday; that's when you call hospice.'"

Thompson suggested his father needed help, more for his mother's sake, and he agreed to have a nurse come out. His father had service for the last four months of life, and the nurse helped him understand that hospice meant being able to pass away in his own home.

“It was a gift, not only for him, because he was able to be a lot more comfortable for those last four months, but it was a gift for my mom, because she had that support she needed,” Thompson said.

He also said once you've decided to enroll in hospice, you are free to change your mind at any point. “There's no coercing. There's no debate. My wish would be that people would at the very least (if given a terminal diagnosis) ... give it a try and if it doesn't feel right, then sign off.”

Hospice care aims to ease patient pain and anxiety, as well as to comfort families so that they do not feel they are walking a final journey all alone.

“Hospice does not prolong life, nor do we accelerate death,” Thompson said. “I think that's another misconception is that sometimes people think, ‘If I get on hospice, my death will happen a lot sooner.’ That is absolutely not the case. The whole intent of hospice is comfort, physical, spiritual, emotional, so however we can help someone attain that, that's our mission. To make that last journey, that last travel, the best that it can be.”

Depth of care

Thompson also spent a lot of time in community outreach and fostering the donor relationships that are so critical to HopeWest's full mission. HopeWest receives Medicare and Medicaid funding, but among conditions is that the organization provides certain unfunded services — the government does not subsidize all of HopeWest's vast commitments to its communities. For example, HopeWest provides individual and group bereavement support for children, teens and adults that are far beyond what the federal government requires under the funded benefit programs. That is where fundraisers and donors come in.

“What HopeWest does for those bereavement services is so above and beyond,” Neil said.

“We go a mile deep, for sure,” Thompson said.

“And we also provide care to anybody, not just bereavement care, but hospice/palliative care regardless of a patient's ability to pay. It's pretty amazing that we've been able to remain true to that for (31) years because of the support from the

community,” added Neil.

Not everyone has insurance, and not every younger person qualifies for Medicaid, yet HopeWest is there for them. Some terminal patients are quite young and also do not qualify for Medicare. “But we take care of them. Unfortunately, we’re seeing more of them, more people who are coming onto service young,” Thompson later said.

“But that’s also a huge sense of pride, being able to say I work for an organization that is never the reason we don’t bring somebody on service is because they can’t afford to pay for it.”

HopeWest does what is needed for each family, regardless of what reimbursements it might or might not receive from federal benefit programs, Neil also said.

HopeWest is currently providing care for 110 - 120 clients overall, up from about 65 - 60 when Thompson first began. But Thompson looks beyond individual patients to their family members who also are part of the care: “It’s not just the patient that we’re caring for.”

He said HopeWest is unwilling to just do the bare minimum to fulfill Medicaid and Medicare requirements for unfunded services. Thompson is particularly proud of what HopeWest provides to grieving kids and teens: one-on-one therapy; schooltime group therapy; Camp Good Grief; Itty Bitty Camp for very small children, and in Montrose, equine therapy. As well, there are family groups.

“It’s really robust. We could have done one little bereavement group and checked that box, but we knew that needs were much deeper than that,” he said.

Thompson also expressed pride in HopeWest’s decision to have a support group for those who have experienced the loss of a loved one through suicide.

Locking arms

His time at HopeWest has not been without hurdles, but the career he had never anticipated proved rewarding. “It was definitely valuable, definitely challenging. I don’t want to go through another pandemic. ... there was just this upending of the world. But again, I’m just going to go back to the team. We just kind of locked arms.”

The COVID-19 virus hit in earnest in 2020, bringing with it restrictions on in-person contact and other steps to reduce the virus' spread as public health officials attempted to get a handle on what was then a new disease, with, initially, no vaccine.

"I think that's just indicative of the community relations that you've helped foster here in this area and across the Western Slope, Kelly. They trust you. They trust HopeWest, because they know their investment is going to be well-served. I want to share from my heart my gratitude for Kelly, his leadership. Your heart for the community has shined brightly in this world," Neil said.

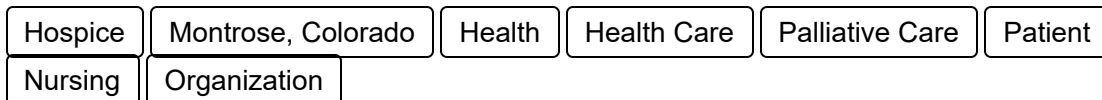
"I think people are starting to understand the whole end of life journey ... I think they're understanding it better and that's a testament, not just to the growth of Montrose, but I think it's just the embracing that that journey doesn't have to be so terrifying," said Thompson.

"I just feel like, if we can just leave whatever piece of the world we can touch in a better place than it was when we encountered it, then we'll all be better off. Be kind when kindness is needed; patient when patience is needed. Be thoughtful when that's needed. And give grace when grace is needed."

HopeWest gratefully accepts donations and volunteers for the Heirlooms store, gardening at the South Fourth location, administrative work, baking cakes and pastries, collecting life stories, patient companionship and multiple other opportunities, as well as donations of time and service from licensed massage therapists (especially needed right now) and hairdressers. Visit www.hopewestco.org or call 970-240-7734 to learn more. To learn more about services offered, call 866-310-8900. For immediate assistance from HopeWest, call 970-241-2212.

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Tags



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