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Hospice home videos keep memories of patients alive

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Faith Broadnax yanked out her breathing tube.

If the "skinny white woman" with the camera — as the headstrong 80-year-old referred to hospice volunteer Maria McKenna — insisted on shooting video of her singing a hymn, she wasn't going to be seen praising Jesus with a plastic hose up her nose.

"This is your show," McKenna said, waiting patiently, lens focused on Broadnax.

When finished, the end-of-life video, produced by Hospice of the Comforter, will recount the colorful life and times of Broadnax, the first black president of Central Florida's restaurant association and a cook whose made-from-scratch Southern meals delighted Orlando foodies at her short-lived restaurant, Hey Faith's Cookin'!

But the keepsake also may serve a more personal, psychologically important purpose.

Retelling life stories — engaging in a candid "life review" — may help a dying person prepare for the end as it approaches, said Susan Bluck, a psychology professor who has studied death and dying at the University of Florida.

People want to feel that they have meaningfully shaped the world somehow, she said.

"That needn't be a huge discovery or a million-dollar bank account," Bluck said. "It might be as simple as having passed on important life lessons and experiences to those children and grandchildren in your own family."

Making a video to celebrate a life — and recognize its ending — is a logical part of a growing trend made possible by easy-to-use technology that allows anyone with an iPhone to capture birthdays, graduations and other milestone events.

"A video fulfills a different, more intimately social purpose," Bluck said. "It allows the dying person to speak in their own words — with their own personality — to family and friends."

The hospice, part of Florida Hospital's Connected Care system, offers the video opportunity to patients whose conditions have reached an advanced stage. Some decline, preferring not to be filmed. Others are too ill to participate.

"My dad just had his story to tell," said Juliet Sheffer, daughter of George C. Wagner Jr., who was filmed by hospice volunteers before he died of lung cancer in 2010 at home in Winter Garden. "He wanted to make sure that we had something of him whenever we needed it, whenever we wanted it, whenever we were ready."

She and her younger sisters, Evonne and Kimmera, have not watched it yet. "Not ready," she said.

But her older brother George and her mother, Dawn Wagner, occasionally view the 40-minute video to feel closer to him.

"I just need to see and hear him some days," mom explained, tears welling.

A retired computer programmer, Wagner also served as a volunteer firefighter in the Philadelphia area, rushing to New York City after the terrorist attacks Sept. 11, 2001, to help the city's overwhelmed first responders.

Though weakened by cancer, he displays in the hospice video the disarming wit and charm that served him as a photographer on Disney's Main Street in the Magic Kingdom, where he worked after he retired to Florida.

When hospice volunteer Paula Calhoon asked him somberly how he would like to be remembered, he grew quiet as if mulling it over with family clustered around his bed.

Then he mustered the breath to sing out, "*I'm Henry the Eighth, I am.*"

Everyone in the room cracked up.

"I try to capture their personality as much as I can," said McKenna, who shot more than 12 hours of footage of Faith Broadnax during several days, careful not to exhaust the indefatigable woman who often labors to breathe.

Broadnax tickled McKenna with detailed yarns of her favorite car, a 1968 convertible GTO; her stint as Sheraton's award-winning food-and-beverage boss; and participating in something called

"Shaqsgiving" when basketball star Shaquille O'Neal paid her to cook Thanksgiving turkey and fixings for 300 homeless people in Orlando.

"I wanted the children to know Granny was a good ol' girl, and she loved to have fun and worked hard all her life," Broadnax said, sinking back into a soft recliner in her living room.

"See what I've done — look, my life's not been wasted."

A retired schoolteacher in Orange and Seminole counties, McKenna, 69, had no filmmaking or journalism experience — just an honest curiosity. She lugs the camera and lights to patients' homes and lets them talk.

She said she considers her work a success if the family watches and says, "Yep, that was Mom!"

Altamonte Springs-based Hospice of the Comforter has provided the free video service to patients and their families for 12 years, producing more than 200 during that span, said Rose van der Berg, director of volunteer services.

Phillip Morrison, 73, a retired engineer, has helped produce 40 legacy videos, as the personal documentaries are sometimes known. The subjects have ranged from millionaires to Medicaid recipients, he said.

Among those he has interviewed were an American soldier who was the only member of his demolition [company](#) to survive D-Day and a German soldier captured during World War II who later chose to become an American citizen.

"It doesn't matter who you are, everybody has a story to tell," Morrison said.

The videos are like an intimate letter handwritten by a dying person who reveals a secret or offers forgiveness and wisdom in the final hours, said Tracy Wharton, an assistant professor of social work at the University of Central Florida.

"It's more than just a goodbye," she said. "It's a way to leave behind something of meaning."

For Marianne Tithof of Orlando, the hospice video of her 105-year-old mother, Bernice Sadus, is a precious keepsake because it reminds her of the fun they had together before she became her mother's primary caregiver.

Her mom, once celebrated on NBC's "Today" show as the Smucker's Centenarian of the Day, laughs and smiles through the filmed interview in which she sings a parody of "Let Me Call You Sweetheart."

She sings: *"Don't you call me sweetheart! I don't love you anymore. Ever since I caught you kissing the blonde next door."*

"That was my buddy, my friend," said Tithof, 79. "It brought back the mom I knew."

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