

## Cass Gonzalez: Following a path of passion and positivity

Cass Gonzalez travelled the world and explored nature anywhere she could find it. An Australian, she'd moved across the world to be with the love of her life. She was positive, gentle, smart, funny, and committed to living life on her own terms.

Her life took a massive detour on July 21, 2017 – her 42nd birthday. She'd been out at dinner with her husband Dave when severe abdominal pain led to an ER visit. Doctors told Cass that, despite not having previously experienced any symptoms, she had a rare, aggressive cancer in multiple organs, her bones, and her lungs, and had only two months to live.

Before that evening, Cass' passions had dictated her life's path. Having earned a degree in environmental science, she was travelling abroad and visiting friends in San Francisco, when she met Dave, a kindred spirit and fellow traveler.

After what Dave describes as "a lot of emails, letters, and expensive phone calls," he quit his job, sold his car, and moved to Australia so the couple could spend six months travelling. Dave and Cass were married in 2002.

They initially settled in Boulder, where the beach girl from Australia quickly took to the mountains. The couple shared endless outdoor adventures, often with their Australian cattle dog, Coen. Their work eventually brought Dave and Cass to Redwood City, where they both found rewarding careers and a whole new natural world to explore, from the coast to the mountains.

With her sudden diagnosis, Cass became dedicated to finding ways to fight her cancer, from radiation and chemotherapy to integrative



*From mountains to beaches, Cass and Dave Gonzalez loved being outdoors.*

and complementary treatment. She focused her positive energy on healing, and continued her long-time meditation practice.

Cass shared her experiences, gratitude, sadness, and perspective at [www.casskickingcancer.com](http://www.casskickingcancer.com). "Most times, I don't care that I have an 'incurable' disease," she wrote. "It's not what matters to me. What does matter is the way I choose to meet each day, and how I connect with those I love and that love me."

Despite her initial prognosis, Cass lived what Dave calls "a pretty full life" for well over a year. Still, the tumors continued to grow throughout her body.

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*Every week since the 1990s, volunteer Anne Goulding writes notes to family members.*

## Grief support available to all in community

While the grieving process is different for each person and each situation, grief always takes time. We support families and loved ones for months, and sometimes years. Each month, our bereavement team meets personally with about 120 people of all ages, and reaches out to even more with letters, cards, and phone calls. Mission Hospice & Home Care offers a wide range of programs available to everyone in the community.

Although much of this care is not reimbursed by insurance, our goal is to make grief support available to everyone who needs it. All of our bereavement programs are free or offered on a sliding scale, thanks to generous support from our donors and volunteers.

"Some people grieve intellectually, others emotionally. Some grieve privately, others need to share," says Bereavement Coordinator Isabel Stenzel, LCSW. "That's why we have programs to let people express themselves with art rather than words, or simply to learn about the grief process."

Our expert grief counselors can help people understand the grief process, offer a safe place to express grief, reduce isolation, and help people gain confidence and set goals for a hopeful future.

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## Compassion for our community

Lisa Deal, CEO



*It was my great pleasure to accept our Board of Directors' invitation to serve as CEO of Mission Hospice & Home Care, following Dwight Wilson's move to Central Coast Community Health Care earlier this year.*

*I joined Mission Hospice eight years ago, and for the past five years served as Chief Clinical Officer, working closely with our amazing clinical team during a time of great growth and change. My experience – from my time as a nurse caring for terminal AIDS patients to several very personal losses – has shown me how critical our work is to the patients and families in our community.*

*Each day as I walk down the hall to my office, I pass by the photos of the two women who founded our organization as San Mateo County's first nonprofit hospice 40 years ago. I am honored to be a part of this legacy, and aim to lead this agency in a way that would make Mac and Helen proud.*

*As we prepare our organization to care for our community for the next 40 years and beyond, we face new challenges, including increased for-profit competition. In 2010, 49% of hospices were nonprofit; in 2017, that number dropped to 25%.*

*In this changing healthcare landscape, it's important that we stay focused on our mission to provide exceptional end-of-life care and education, and that we partner with like-minded organizations to preserve nonprofit, community-based hospice and palliative care here in the Bay Area.*

*We must also be responsive to our community's changing needs. A great example is our recent endeavor to make hospice care more accessible to the growing number of homeless people in our community. This is a project we're undertaking with support from the San Mateo County Health Care for the Homeless and Farm Worker Health Program, and others.*

*Working together with LifeMoves and Gift of Love, we recently cared for a 30-year-old man with metastatic kidney cancer. He was living in a homeless shelter with his infant son and his elderly mother. While our medical team attended to the acute needs of the patient in the final weeks of his life, our social work and outreach teams worked with shelter staff to support his baby and his mother through this heartbreaking situation.*

*This is the kind of compassionate, community-based care that drew me to Mission Hospice, and that we are committed to continuing to provide. But this kind of care is only possible thanks to our generous donors, our community partners, and our incredible staff and volunteers. I cannot thank you enough. 🐾*

## Join us on Facebook!

 [facebook.com/missionhospice](https://www.facebook.com/missionhospice)

## Upcoming events

Unless otherwise noted, all events are at Mission Hospice & Home Care, 1670 South Amphlett, Suite 300, San Mateo.

### 2019 Author Series

Cheryl Espinosa-Jones • Thursday, March 28 • 6:30-8pm  
Jackie Madden Haugh • Thursday, April 11 • 6:30-8pm  
Judith Redwing Keyssar • Thursday, May 30 • 6:30-8pm

The final three events in our new series of readings and discussions. Free. Tickets at [MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com](https://www.MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com).

### Mother Lear: A We Players original production

Saturday, March 30 • 7:30-9:30pm

This moving two-person play follows a woman with dementia who speaks using the text of King Lear. \$25. Tickets at [MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com](https://www.MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com).

### Art for Healing Through Grief workshop series

First Thursdays, April 4 – October 3 • 6-7:30pm

Six monthly sessions that offer a creative outlet for expressing grief. Free. Register with Isabel at 650.931.8236 or [istenzel@MissionHospice.org](mailto:istenzel@MissionHospice.org).

### Grief & Stuff: Organizing belongings after a loss

Saturday, April 6 • 1-2:30pm

For those struggling with getting rid of their loved ones' belongings. Free. Register with Isabel at 650.931.8236 or [istenzel@MissionHospice.org](mailto:istenzel@MissionHospice.org).

### Stories That Heal: Weekend writing workshop

Saturday, May 11 + Sunday, May 12 • 9:30am-4:30pm

Learn how to tell your story in this small-group writing workshop with author Ann Randolph. \$320; register at [MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com](https://www.MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com).

### Take Charge! Advance care planning workshops

Mondays, May 6 + 13 • 6:30-8:30pm

Coastside Adult Day Health Center, 925 Main St., Half Moon Bay

Thursdays, May 22 + 29 • 1-3pm

Little House, 800 Middle Avenue, Menlo Park

Learn more about advance care planning and the steps you can take to help get the care you want, based on what matters most to you. Free. Register for Half Moon Bay workshops with Lynne Siracusa 650.726.5067 x210; register for Menlo Park workshops at [MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com](https://www.MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com).

### An (inappropriate) evening with Ann Randolph

Saturday, May 11 • 7:30-9:30pm

"Inappropriate in All the Right Ways," a funny, provocative (and R-rated) one-woman show. Free. Tickets at [MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com](https://www.MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com).

### New volunteer informational meetings

Tuesday, May 21 • noon-1pm or 5:30-6:30pm

Find out all about volunteering with Mission Hospice. No RSVP needed. For details contact Craig at 650.532.2323 or [CSchroeder@MissionHospice.org](mailto:CSchroeder@MissionHospice.org).

### In Memory: Annual community memorial service

Sunday, June 2 • 4-5:30pm

College Heights Church, 1150 W Hillsdale Blvd, San Mateo

Our annual community service is for anyone grieving the loss of a loved one. Free and open to all; RSVP 650.554.1000.

### Writing Through Loss support group

Wednesdays, June 19 - August 7, 2019 • 6:30-8pm

This group has 8 weekly meetings to explore grief through writing. No experience necessary. Free. Registration is required: 650.554.1000.

### Movies@Mission Hospice: Prison Terminal

Thursday, June 27 • 6:30-8:30pm

The first in our 2019 series, a look at the final months of an inmate whose fellow prisoners cared for him. Free. Tickets at [MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com](https://www.MissionHospice.Eventbrite.com).

For details on all of our events, visit [www.MissionHospice.org](https://www.MissionHospice.org).

## Bereavement program offers something for everyone

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### **Individual counseling and drop-in support groups**

Our specially trained social workers provide individual grief counseling and lead free drop-in support groups open to all in San Mateo, Half Moon Bay, and Pacifica (schedule and details at [MissionHospice.org](http://MissionHospice.org)).

"There's real diversity in our groups," says Isabel. "Some people are days from their loss; others are years from their loss. The more experienced people can be models for survival."



***"Hearing others in my support group describe what I was feeling but could not express – even to myself – helped to normalize my experience and allowed me to begin healing."***

**Janise Belson, volunteer**

### **Specialized groups and workshops**

Some groups are designed around particular populations, such as those who have lost a parent or a partner. One of our new groups, "Resilience in Grief," is for people who lost a loved one six or more months ago; the group helps them learn skills and strategies for reengaging in life.

Mission Hospice also offers several groups and day-long workshops to help people express and understand their grief through writing, creative expression, or organizing the belongings of someone who has died. These can help people who want to process grief in ways other than open discussion.

### **Complicated grief treatment**

Fairly common but little recognized, complicated grief is when someone a year or more from a loss experiences intense avoidance and distress around accepting the reality of the death. "Most people with grief go through a trajectory of integrating the grief," says Isabel. "Those with complicated grief get stuck, and need help adapting."

With training from Dr. Katherine Shear, founder of the Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University, our staff now offers evidence-based treatment for complicated grief. We also host Dr. Shear several times a year to train other professionals.

### **Care for the entire team**

Grief support is also critical for our own staff and volunteers, as well as for staff in facilities where our patients live. "As people who see death frequently," says Meechal Itzkowitz Hall, LCSW, Bereavement Coordinator, "we have to acknowledge that we are affected, and need support as well."

Our bereavement counselors help everyone on our team understand their grief, know how to care for themselves, and avoid burnout.

### **Volunteers key to the program**

These programs are all organized and led by our small but mighty grief support team, which includes licensed social workers with specialized bereavement training, bereavement interns who work alongside



***"Attending the support group was painful at times, yet comforting. As time went on, I was better able to cope with my deep grief due to the support of Mission Hospice."***

**Ernie Roeder, volunteer**

our experienced therapists, and our trained bereavement volunteers.

These volunteers are integral to our grief support program: they write cards, make phone calls, and even sew keepsake pillows from the clothing of loved ones.

Together, our bereavement team is committed to ensuring that anyone in our community who is grieving a loss is able to get the support they need. 🐾

*For more information about grief support or volunteering, call 650.554.1000.*



*Bereavement Coordinators Meechal Itzkowitz Hall (L) and Isabel Stenzel and their team provide a range of grief support not only for our patients' family members, but for the entire community.*

**Mission Hospice & Home Care** serves patients and families in the San Mateo and Santa Clara County area with quality, compassionate end-of-life care and education. Founded in 1979, our local, independent nonprofit has supported thousands of patients and their families through illness and bereavement. Donations from the community support our exceptional care and educational programs, and help us serve people regardless of their medical coverage or ability to pay.

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**INSIDE: Cass Gonzalez: A path of passion and positivity**  
**Grief support program offers something for everyone**  
**A note from our new CEO, Lisa Deal**



**Cass Gonzalez** ...cont. from front

By October her symptoms had become more intense, and her doctor and social worker at the Stanford Cancer Center both recommended Mission House. The Woodside house – very near their home in Redwood City – had just opened. As soon as he saw the house, Dave said he “knew it was meant to be – it was so Cass.” Her room opened to the garden, full of flowers and hummingbirds.

Dave stayed with Cass at all hours, sleeping on a cot in her room. “That first week, the weather was spectacular, with blue skies and sunshine,” Dave remembers. “We spent every day outside in the back yard.”

Family came to visit from all over the world. “We basically took over the house. It was really special to have this place to be together,” Dave says. “The staff at the house were incredibly loving and patient.”

In her final blog post, Cass wrote, “I accept that cancer will one day outlast me physically, and I will concede my body. However, I define what my journey means to me, and how I choose to walk it each day that I’m able.”

On November 17, just weeks after she arrived at Mission House, Cass died as she lived: on her terms, and surrounded by her family.

“The experience was personal, and loving, and everything that you would want it to be,” says Dave. “Right in the midst of something so horrible, it was the best possible scenario. We felt blessed to have that happen.” 🍂

**CELEBRATING 40!**

On January 27, more than 200 people celebrated our organization’s 40th anniversary at the Sharon Heights Golf & Country Club in Menlo Park.



The festive event brought together people from throughout the history of Mission Hospice, including the family of co-founder Mac Nash, below.

Find more photos and our special 40th anniversary video at [www.facebook.com/missionhospice](http://www.facebook.com/missionhospice).

