

## Senior care expert Bernie Mellott learns benefits of hospice first-hand

Peninsula native Bernadette (Bernie) Mellott is an expert in long-term care. As the Executive Director of Ombudsman Services of San Mateo County, Inc., she runs a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the wishes and rights of people who live in licensed long-term care.

In this role, she talks to people about hospice. But she said that she didn't truly understand just how much support it offers until her husband Tom was in his final year, and they experienced hospice care first-hand. "Mission Hospice was just great," she says. "There's no other way to put it."

Bernie met Tom, a Hillsborough native, at a teen club when she was a sophomore at Notre Dame and he was a junior at Serra High School. She says, "I thought he was out of my league, but he called, so we went out." That was the beginning of a life together that included 57 years of marriage, raising two children in San Carlos, and welcoming four grandchildren.

Tom taught Bernie to follow his beloved Giants, 49ers, and Warriors, and coached soccer and baseball even after their two children, Jacquie and Tom, were done playing. He was committed to his family, his sports teams, and his community. Bernie says, "He was a very kind person. Everyone who met Tom loved him."



*Married 57 years, the Mellotts were grateful that Tom could stay at home thanks to his Mission Hospice team.*

When Tom was diagnosed with laryngeal cancer in March 2020, he went through radiation treatment. The cancer caused him to need a feeding tube, which Bernie learned to manage. Still, the tube sometimes leaked or came out, and in his last year, he had 15 trips to the emergency department. Bernie says Tom always hated the feeding tube, and eventually said that he wanted the tube removed. His PAMF physician, oncologist Dr. Paula Kushlan, told Tom and Bernie that this meant it was time for hospice.

Tom valued his privacy and was reluctant to have anyone in his house.

Bernie said she pushed back, telling him, "Honey, we either need hospice in the house or we need to find a place for you to go, because I can't do this by myself." They both wanted Tom to stay at home, so they followed Dr. Kushlan's recommendation and started care with Mission Hospice in February 2021.

As it turned out, Tom came to love having his Mission Hospice team in the house, especially his nurse Linda Corell and home health aide Tommy Joe, who shared Tom's love of classic cars.

Thanks to this support, the Mellotts' life continued as it had, including their weekly Sunday night family dinners. Due to the

pandemic, they would gather on the outdoor patio with their kids and grandkids and the family Cocker Spaniel, Buster Posey.

The night before Tom died, the family coaxed him out of his recliner and into the hospital bed that he'd been avoiding. Bernie said he was restless, but comfortable in the bed and happy to be at home with his family and surrounded by his sports memorabilia. Tom passed away the next morning. Moments later, his dog hopped up on the bed and licked Tom on the cheek. Bernie says that Buster Posey sat right near the urn containing his ashes up until the day he was buried.

"Tom provided a fabulous life for all of us," Bernie remembers. "I could never have kept him at home with his dog and everyone without the help of Mission Hospice. I had such trust in our Mission Hospice team. As hard as that time was

### Ombudsman Services of San Mateo County, Inc.

This nonprofit protects and advocates for people who live in the 442 licensed long-term care facilities throughout the County to ensure that residents receive the care they deserve. Their staff and volunteers monitor facilities, advocate for residents, investigate and resolve complaints, and educate and train facility staff. **For more information, visit [ossmc.org](https://ossmc.org).**

*...continued on page 3*

# Ron McKinney: Taking control with the End of Life Option Act

By Joel McKinney

*After two decades of serious illness, in fall of 2021 our patient Ron McKinney chose to take aid-in-dying medication, surrounded by his family. His Mission Hospice team supported Ron and his family throughout the process, as we have with many others over the years who chose this path. His son Joel shares their family's story.*

More than 20 years ago, Dad was diagnosed with viral herpes encephalitis. It was life-altering for him – it affected his speech, memory, motor skills, communication, everyday life, and very existence. Overnight, it turned my mom into a long-term caregiver.

At the beginning, he was upset and frustrated. It's a rare virus, and a lot of people don't survive it. We'd all hoped that his speech and memory would improve, but they quickly plateaued, and he knew he wasn't going to get back to where he had been.



*Joel and Ron McKinney enjoying a sunny day together during Ron's final weeks at Mission House.*

Dad had seizures on and off for the rest of his life. As he became less and less active, his body really deteriorated. He took so much medication, some of which caused him to be groggy or dizzy.

It was hard to watch, but he did his best to put a smile on his face, laugh, and enjoy music and food. He simplified his life dramatically. He really looked forward to ice cream and the one beer he was allowed to have. He and mom handled it so gracefully.

## End of Life Option Act

In 2016, California passed a law making it legal for terminally ill patients to request and take aid-in-dying medication.

The Act requires two physicians to attest that the patient has six months or less to live and is of sound mind. The patient must be able to take the drug themselves – no one can assist them – and can change their mind at any time.

Mission Hospice is committed to honoring our patients' beliefs, values, and choices. If a patient wishes to exercise their legal option to access aid in dying, we will support them and their loved ones.

**For more information, visit [MissionHospice.org/ELOA](https://MissionHospice.org/ELOA).**

In his last three years, his body failed him. He fell repeatedly and suffered broken hips, hip replacements, and stints in rehab. He was very tough, both physically and mentally.

Then my dad fell again, breaking his hip and his elbow. He had a high threshold for pain, but this was a different story. While he was in Sequoia Hospital recovering, a problem with his IV line led to his heart stopping, and I thought it was the end of the road for him. But they stabilized him, and within 24 hours he had started to talk and eat again.

The surgeon explained what he wanted to do, and Dad said, "I've had enough. I've lived a good life and I don't want to do this anymore. I'm done." He said that part very clearly – he didn't want any more surgeries, any more rehab, any more in and out of the hospital.

We all agreed that we wanted to honor Dad's wishes and not put him through any more suffering. We knew his quality of life was not going to get any better and would probably get worse – maybe a lot worse. He didn't want that, and we didn't want that for him.

We asked the doctor what our other options were. How could we care for him without putting him through any more misery? The doctors at Sequoia told us about how wonderful Mission House is. It's right in Redwood City where we live, and we all agreed that was the best place for Dad. Thank the Lord we were able to get him admitted within 48 hours.

Mission House was amazing. Dr. Gary stopped by so often, communicated with us regularly – there were no surprises. He always answered all of our questions. We felt in really good hands with Mission Hospice.

Dad was adamant in his desire to not go forward with long-term care or surgeries. Dr. Gary understood Dad's wishes.

*...continued on back*



## Craig Schroeder puts the heart into volunteer support

Over a decade ago, Craig Schroeder was ready for a career change and had applied to nursing school to become a trauma nurse. His friend Dr. Gary Pasternak, who had been working with Mission Hospice for several years, suggested that Craig would get valuable experience by volunteering. Craig completed his volunteer training in 2012 and dove right in, telling Volunteer Director Hank Nourse that he wanted three patients at a time.

He remembers fondly one particularly special patient he visited for nearly a year: Helen Lagen, who co-founded Mission Hospice in 1979. The pair became close friends.

Helen, who was bedridden, loved being outside in her garden. Each time he visited, Craig moved her to a gurney and took her outside where they sat together and talked. “It was an honor and a privilege to visit Helen. It was like taking care of my grandmother again. I learned so much about Mission Hospice.”

The experience of volunteering changed the trajectory of Craig’s life. Instead of heading to nursing school, in 2015 he joined the Mission Hospice staff as a Volunteer Coordinator – and when Hank retired three years later, Craig became our Volunteer Services Director.

Together with Volunteer Coordinators Jennifer Guevarra and Constance Sweeney, Craig now supports around 130 volunteers who work throughout the Peninsula and South Bay. He leads an intensive 26-hour volunteer training twice a year, holds monthly volunteer support meetings, and offers volunteers continuing education and special training.

Craig explains that the Mission Hospice training is unique: while most hospice agencies rely on computer-based virtual training and testing, Mission Hospice volunteers are taught by our own experts, based on our philosophy of care.

“The throughline is heart-centered communication, listening, and compassion at the bedside.”

Craig certainly brings his heart to the program. A trained chef, he prepares and serves lunch to the volunteers at each of the Saturday training sessions. “No one goes hungry around me,” he says proudly.

Craig sees this kind of above-and-beyond support for volunteers as a part of our personalized approach. “Our volunteers support patients and families at the most transitional, intimate, and difficult time of life,” says Craig. “They need good training and good support to do their job. Our volunteers really make our organization stand out – they are the heart of Mission Hospice.”

Long-time volunteer Paul Smith says the feeling is reciprocal. “Craig makes each volunteer feel that they matter, and he gives you his complete attention and focus. He leads by example, and is sincere, insightful, supportive, and a total believer in the work we are all doing.”

Volunteers come to Mission Hospice from all over and for all kinds of reasons, and Craig has expanded the program to include high school and college students. All volunteers



*Craig Schroeder (right) with volunteers Kathy Gaiser and Philip Georgy at last fall's volunteer appreciation dinner – for which Craig cooked the food.*

are trained to leave whatever’s going on in their life – good or bad – at the door. “The patient and family get to set the agenda,” he says. “The volunteers bring the magic.”

To make this magic happen, Craig and his team put a lot of thought into the match between a volunteer and a potential patient – each one unique. “We think about the patient and their needs, as well as the volunteer’s skills and experience,” he says. “A patient and family have only one chance at dying, and the match has to work for everyone.”

Craig says he is proud to be able to support our volunteers and – through them – our patients. His leadership is personal and heart-centered. “Everyone has a story,” he says. “Everyone has triumphs and losses in life. And everyone deserves respect, kindness, and compassion.” 🍌

---

### **Bernie Mellott...** *continued from front*

for all of us, hospice was really a wonderful experience. It was the best way I could send Tom off.”

Bernie says she wishes more people knew about the benefits of hospice. She’s committed to seeing that everyone in long-term care gets the care they deserve. And now, she’s also an advocate for hospice care.

“Hospice lets you take care of your loved one at home, keep them comfortable, and have a normal life as long as possible,” says Bernie. “That’s what it’s all about.” 🍌

**PENINSULA OFFICE** 66 Bovet Road, Suite 100, San Mateo, CA 94402  
**SOUTH BAY OFFICE** 688 Willow St., Suite A-2, San Jose, CA 95125  
www.MissionHospice.org • 650.554.1000 • 408.554.2434

Mission Hospice & Home Care serves patients and families in the San Francisco Peninsula and South Bay with personalized, 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.

<b>BOARD OF DIRECTORS</b>	Mukund Acharya	<b>AUXILIARY PRESIDENT</b>
Sally Bergman	Charlie Balquist	Vibeke Gade
<b>Chair</b>	Stacy Blanchard	
Kate Jamentz	Lisa Burris	<b>FOUNDERS</b>
<b>Vice Chair</b>	John Draper	Helen Lagen
Dr. Robert Roe	James Hine	Mac Nash
<b>Past Chair</b>	Dr. Michelle Pezzani	<b>CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER</b>
Jeff Gerard	Dr. Rebecca Sands	Dolores Miller
<b>Treasurer</b>		
Judy DiPaolo		
<b>Secretary</b>		

To add or remove your name from our mailing list, please call 650.554.1000.

## INSIDE: Senior care expert learns benefits of hospice first-hand Taking control with the End of Life Option Act Craig Schroeder puts the heart into volunteer support



### Ron McKinney... continued from page 2

We went back to the beautiful patio to chat, and he told us that Dad had to make decisions about how he was living every day. I was worried about Dad suffering. I knew there was aid-in-dying in other states. I asked Dr. Gary about this, and he explained California's End of Life Option Act.

Dad knew that this was what he wanted, and we reassured him that we didn't think God would judge him for it. Mission Hospice volunteer Paul Smith guided us through a number of conversations about spirituality, which was so helpful.

The law required another doctor to confirm that these were Dad's wishes, and then we had to fill a prescription for the meds that would shut down his body. August 20 – that would be my dad's last day with us. The days leading up to August 20 were the longest days of my life.

Still, it was good to have a date, and a plan. That allowed us to exhale and focus on spending as much quality time

with Dad as possible. We sat with him, listened to music, watched movies, looked at photos. A lot of people came in from out of state – my brother and his wife, their son and daughter, my wife's family – everyone. That was nice; it wasn't a sudden goodbye.

Even though Dad was still in a lot of pain, we could make each day as special as possible for him.

The Mission House folks were all amazing. Anything we asked for, they made it happen. Dad loved to joke and try to make people laugh, and they were right there with him. We took him on walks around the 'hood, spent time together as a family. We couldn't have asked for a better place for him to spend his final weeks.

When August 20 came, we all gathered in Dad's room. We were able to tell him



how much we love him, say our goodbyes, play his favorite songs.

Dad had been really lethargic. But as soon as the doctors walked in, he sprung up and took the medication. It felt like he was saving his strength for that moment. I

think he didn't want the misery or the pain to continue any longer. He was ready to be at peace.

The End of Life Option Act gave Dad a chance to do something about his life. He hadn't had the power to do that for more than 20 years. For him to be able to make that choice, and for us to be able to support him, was empowering for all of us. He took control.

I've been grieving my Dad for the last 20 years. Now I am at peace that he is no longer suffering, free of pain and burden, and strong and whole again. 🍀