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Marcia Guntzel Feldman comforts dying people with music.

She plays music to ease passage out of this world

By Cynthia Cantrell

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BEDFORD — When Joan Ux of Pepperell was a young girl, she recalls, her mother made sure she and her sister took voice and piano lessons.

“She wasn’t musically inclined herself,” Ux said, “but she made sure music was part of our lives.”

So as 100-year-old Ellen Houghton lay dying in July in the skilled nursing facility at Carleton-Willard Village in Bedford, Ux made sure that music was a part of her mother’s final days.

She took advantage of a service offered by the retirement community and asked to have guitarist and singer Marcia Guntzel Feldman play soothing music for her mother.

“My mom wasn’t able to communicate that well, but the nurses told us they saw quite a difference in her relaxation,” Ux said. “The last week with Mom was very traumatizing; I never saw someone die before. We were zoned into making sure she was comfortable, and we do think the music was helping Mom. Any-

thing that can be done to make someone’s last days more peaceful is very much appreciated.”

Feldman, who lives in Dedham, has been playing music and singing for dying people for 13 years. While she will play for people who are not in the Bedford nursing home, she is on call at Carleton-Willard Village, where staff members know to ask the families of dying residents if the resident would like music to ease them through their final time.

If the resident and family members agree, Feldman visits the resident for about a half-hour at a time for days, weeks, or months. She takes requests for religious, jazz, and other music selections, or just softly plays classical pieces when that seems more appropriate.

“Music can speak to the spirit of a person, regardless of whether they’re religious or not, and can serve as a way to help them move on,” said Feldman. “The end of a loved one’s life is a delicate, emotional time, and music can be a nonverbal way for a family member to be together with a loved one. You don’t have to worry about having just the right thing to say.

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Guitarist offers soothing tones to local patients nearing the end

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You can just sit together and be.”

David Ball, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Extended Care Federation, said many facilities that care for the elderly provide music, though more commonly in the form of a big band or other group performing for all its residents gathered in one place.

He said Feldman's one-on-one approach “sounds terrific and somewhat unusual.

“The fact that Marcia does this [at Carleton-Willard Village] is a positive reflection on them both working together to enrich the lives of elderly residents,” Ball said.

Feldman said she started searching for a way to use music to comfort the dying and their loved ones after her father's sudden death from a stroke in 1988. One of her inspirations has been the work of singer, harpist, and composer Therese Schroeder-Sheker of Montana, who has worked to alleviate the physical and spiritual pain of dying patients through music for more than 30 years. Feldman said she had heard of others doing similar work in other parts of the country before she began playing for residents of the Sherrill House, a skilled nursing facility in Jamaica Plain, in 1993.

Feldman, who said she is not a music therapist, began playing at Carleton-Willard Village four or five years ago, after a former Sherrill House nurse joined the facility and told colleagues about her services.

Janet Macero, Carleton-Willard Village director of social services, typically alerts Feldman when the time is right for her to visit a resident. She said Feldman

is an on-call, independent contractor who is not an employee of Carleton-Willard Village. Macero said Feldman's fees are paid for by Carleton-Willard Village rather than billed to family members.

Feldman said she has performed throughout New England and in the Caribbean and Europe and still plays at weddings, hotels, restaurants, and corporate events. She works as a part-time assistant to former Surgeon General Dr. Julius Richmond, a professor emeritus at Harvard Medical School. She continues to work with the dying, she said, because it is “very satisfying, very nourishing on a spiritual level for me.”

In 13 years, Feldman said, she has been present at the moment of death only four times, describing each experience as “an honor.” She recalled numerous instances when the labored breathing of a dying person became more regular during her visits, and she said she believes people may continue to hear, or at least be soothed by the vibration of music in the room, even after they have lost consciousness.

Cato Logcher's family had Feldman play for her as she neared death from ovarian cancer in 2003.

Throughout her 92 years, Logcher's love of music endured. A talented singer, she enjoyed trips to see the Boston Symphony Orchestra with other residents at

Carleton-Willard Village. She also was involved in the organization's church services.

In her last days, she listened to Feldman play the hymns she loved so much.

“The two of them developed a wonderful bond,” said Bob Logcher, Cato's son, recalling how his mother, who normally would not allow strangers into her room, would “perk up” when Feldman played. “Passing is inevitable, but you want to make it as nice an experience as you can.

Marcia's music was a tremendous comfort to my mother, and seeing that made letting go so much easier for us.”

Meryl Ray of Belmont said her family welcomed Feldman's visits when her 91-year-old mother, Mary Sillen, began dying of diabetes and congestive heart failure in 2004. Ray said Sillen, the wife of a Baptist minister, was a “gentle, gracious woman; a real lady,”

who would sing hymns to her children as their father prepared his sermon every Saturday night.

“That's why having Marcia at the end was so special,” said Ray. “She helped her exit her life in a way that was so my mother. It was an absolute gift to have that experience of quiet and peacefulness.

“As a family member, you can go to the chapel or have a minister come in, but music can be uniquely soothing,” said Ray.

“Even though she doesn't really know you, Marcia has a real ability to convey a feeling of warm love. It's pretty powerful.”

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BOB LOGCHER