

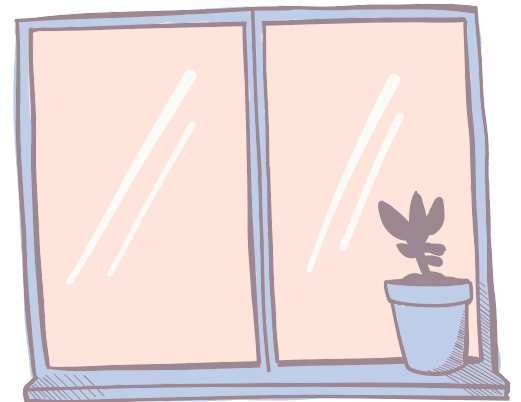
Never a Task, But a Person

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In the fall of 2021, I took a biomedical ethics course with a service-learning component where students volunteer in hospice care. We were to provide companionship to patients during the times their families could not be there with them or to those with few visitors who requested companionship. I had an experience with a patient while doing these service-learning hours that taught me an incredibly important lesson.

When I first learned that there was a patient to visit in Arlington, I was ecstatic. At that point in time, I had under half of the minimum requirement of volunteering hours for the course and was desperate to gain more. So, naturally, when I saw a patient available not too far from my house, I jumped at the opportunity. I learned of this assignment later in the week and planned to wait until the following Monday to visit the patient, 'Mr. Doe.' However, on Friday the volunteer coordinator let us know the patient might not make it until the next Monday and had a fear of dying alone. So, I changed my original plan and decided to go the next day, but later that same day, I was given an update that the patient might not make it through the night. At that moment, I decided to meet with him at six in the evening.

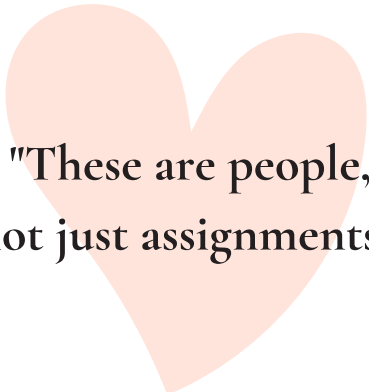
When I entered, I wasn't sure what to do. I sat there for a minute or two before deciding I should introduce myself, even if he might be asleep. When I introduced myself and told him I would be there with him for a while, I saw a small smile on his face for a second. I decided to talk to him. I saw small movements in his face when I talked to him for an hour or so. I told him childhood stories about my parents and brothers. I described the weather outside and how the night sky looked. I did this for a few hours until I was joined by another classmate, 'J.' By the time J arrived the patient had nodded off, and he had stopped making small movements with his face. J and I just continued to talk to him. J shared stories such as things about his family, pets, the holidays, and anything we could think of that he might like to know about. I stayed there until ten at night when my dad asked me to come home. I know if I had asked to stay longer, he would've said okay, but he would have stayed up waiting for me to get home. Even though I felt in my chest that I should stay, I left. J ended up staying until Mr. Doe passed.



Looking back to when I first learned of Mr. Doe, although my mind has since changed, I thought of him as an assignment and a means to get more volunteering hours. I forgot that he was a person — a sick person who didn't have very much time left and just wanted some company. I realized that I had been thinking this way when the hospice volunteer coordinator sent out the news of his passing being near. That's when it hit me that he was not just an assignment or task that needed to be checked off, but a person. The volunteer coordinator had warned us that some patients might pass while we did this, but I didn't understand what that really meant and how it would affect me until I experienced it firsthand. This was a person at the end of life: One second, they're here and the next they're not. They aren't just hours or just an assignment, and they shouldn't be thought of that way. From the time I got that message of his passing being near, and with every minute I spent with him it sunk in more. I could see how weak he was, I could hear how hard it was getting for him to breathe as the hours passed, this man was going to die soon, and I was there because he feared dying alone.

At that moment, I realized that I felt guilty for my past thinking and wanted to do anything I could to fulfill Mr. Doe's last wish. Although I was not with Mr. Doe when he passed, I am thankful that my classmate stayed behind to be with him so that in his final moments, this wish was fulfilled.

It might sound odd considering that the four hours I spent with Mr. Doe was the only time I had spent with him, and I had less than pure motives for volunteering beforehand, but his passing was difficult for me. I believe that it is because I have never spent time with someone who was so close to dying, and I felt guilty for my previous thoughts. I didn't know him, I only spent a few hours with him, but he was a person who lived a full life, did amazing things, had a family, and was, according to staff, an incredibly sweet man. It was a life, and I watched as it was slipping away, which was more difficult than I thought it would be.



**"These are people,
not just assignments."**



When I first entered the class and the hospice volunteer coordinator spoke to us, I remember her saying, "These are people, not just assignments." I remember thinking, "Of course they are people, how can you forget someone is a person?" However, that's exactly what happened to me with Mr. Doe. I learned from him that forgetting someone's personhood and seeing only a task can unfortunately happen easily, and to anyone, just as it did to me. I am sorry to Mr. Doe because I did not think of him the way he deserved to be thought of. I am also thankful to Mr. Doe for the lesson I learned from my experience with him. I will keep this lesson close to my heart as I treat patients in my future career and will always remember above all else that a patient is never a task, but a person.