

One More Sunrise

Good things happen at the kitchen table—good food, good family, good conversations. Married since 1956, Will and Mary Baird of Grand Forks, ND, shared many happy times in that simple setting. But advance directives? Years ago, that topic reached the kitchen table, too. “Our daughter Lois got us going and I’m glad she did,” says Mary.

A parish nurse at the time, today Lois Ustanko directs faith community nursing at Sanford Health in Fargo. She’s a strong advocate of advance directives -- the legal document that allows you to communicate your wishes about how you want to be treated if you become unable to make medical decisions for yourself.



Make Your Own Choices

Since 1995, Will had bravely battled Parkinson’s disease. Ten years later, another health challenge: a diseased heart valve that required major surgery. “That was when we started talking about advance directives,” says Mary. “Once we got comfortable talking about them, we put our decisions in writing.”

Their strong Christian faith and life experiences informed their decisions. They thought about Mary’s sister who at age 34 suffered a brain aneurysm and spent the rest of her life in a vegetative state. Will thought about friends he had visited in nursing homes. “We both knew what we didn’t want,” says Mary. With Lois’s help, they gained a better understanding of the issues including resuscitation, feeding tubes and pain management. “Dad was adamant—no feeding tube, even when his Parkinson’s made swallowing very difficult,” recalls Lois. “To him eating was about tasting the food and feeling its texture. Mom is an excellent cook, and his ability to eat was key to his quality-of-life.”

Keep It Current

With his advance directives in place, Will underwent valve surgery at Sanford Heart Center in 2005. The successful surgery gave him more years of good life. But in 2009, another decline occurred. Surgery was not an option for Will’s failing heart, plus his Parkinson’s had progressed. “Each time my dad’s health changed, we’d revisit the advance directives to make sure they still reflected his wishes,” says Lois. “His care team was on the same page, too, including his nurse from Sanford Home Care in East Grand Forks.”

Die with Dignity

By Thanksgiving 2010, 80-year-old Will knew the end was near. An episode of severe breathing problems prompted a final trip to the ER in Grand Forks. He was admitted to the intensive care unit at Altru Hospital, but not for long. The family met with Will’s medical team. Thanks to his advance directives, the decision was made to move him to a private room on the sixth floor where he could be surrounded by family and receive care focused entirely on comfort.

“With seven kids, there could’ve been bickering as to what was best, but with the advance directives, we knew what Will wanted,” says Mary. “That document played a big part.” Comfortable and able to talk, Will had last conversations with family members. He obtained pain relief with a medication pump. He enjoyed a couple more bites of Mary’s chocolate pie.

“He kept saying he wanted to see one more sunrise,” says Mary. That weekend the family rearranged his hospital room so he could see it, but fog interfered. “Sunday afternoon we got a miracle,” says Mary. “Will hadn’t been able to straighten his hands before because of the Parkinson’s, but somehow he lifted the covers, brought his hands together, looked up and smiled. The sun came out, and he passed a few minutes after sunrise. It was just so peaceful. A beautiful moment.”

Do Your Part

Have you considered your advance healthcare directives? Written your wishes? Decided who will speak for you if you can’t? Start the process on April 16, National Healthcare Decisions Day.

And if you’re waiting for the “right” age? “Any adult over 18 years of age should have advance directives,” says Mary who is 83 years old today. “Because you never know what might happen.”

For More Information

For more information about National Healthcare Decisions Day, visit their website at <https://www.nhdd.org/>. For local assistance about advance healthcare directives, visit Honoring Choices ND, <https://www.honoringchoicesnd.org/>, or Honoring Choices MN, <http://www.honoringchoices.org/>.