

Collierville hospice will ease family burdens

By Daniel Connolly

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Thomas Whitehead of Baptist Memorial Health Care arranges shovels and hardhats in preparation for the groundbreaking Wednesday of the new Baptist Trinity Hospice House and the Kemmons Wilson Family Center for Good Grief in Collierville.

Nancy Averwater remembers a phone call from David C. Klimetz, whose wife, Sheila, had an untreatable brain tumor.

"Why does this community not have a place for my wife to go?" she recalls him asking.

Averwater, administrator and CEO of Baptist Trinity Home Care & Hospice, said Klimetz family members believed they couldn't meet her needs at home. But there were few other options, because Memphis had no free-standing hospice.

Klimetz died Jan. 12, 2006, in a palliative care unit at Baptist Memorial Hospital-Memphis at age 46. Her husband said the setting was decent, but not ideal.

He spoke Wednesday at the groundbreaking for a 24-bed hospice on the campus of Baptist Memorial Hospital-Collierville.

It will have homelike rooms and focus on making people as comfortable as possible in their last days. A center to help people deal with losses -- the Kemmons Wilson Family Center for Good Grief -- will be housed in the same complex.

"This is going to be so much better an environment," Klimetz said.

Hospice activists in Memphis say there's a great need for free-standing centers because the care that visiting hospice agencies provide at home isn't always enough.

Dr. Tom Meriwether, medical director of Baptist Trinity Hospice, predicts Baptist's hospice will be busy.

"In a population of this size, the need is great," he said. "And it will be full from its opening."

Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare plans to break ground this fall on a 30-bed hospice on Quince between Messick and Kirby Parkway in East Memphis.

A recently opened eight-bed hospice -- Veterans Life House -- is reserved for former members of the military.

The Baptist and Methodist hospices will serve patients like Sheila Klimetz, a mother of two daughters and a vice president at an investment group. Her husband said the first sign of trouble came when she collapsed on Sept. 27, 2005, at their daughter's volleyball game. Doctors diagnosed a brain tumor, and in a short time treatment options had been exhausted.

The tumor caused partial paralysis. David Klimetz, 51, wasn't comfortable making medical decisions and wanted a health professional with his wife at all times. And he said he and his wife didn't want to leave a room in their house permanently tied to the memory of her death.

He said it was difficult to find a place in a medical culture that focuses on curing illness, not comforting the dying.

"Inside that system, terminal illness feels like a failure," he said.

The palliative care unit was geared to the needs of dying patients, but was still a sterile hospital environment, he said.

He doesn't want to sound critical of Baptist, saying that the staffers did the best they could with the resources available. But he said the experience could have been easier.

"If this facility had been in place, it would have been much more comfortable."

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Fundraising campaign

Baptist has raised \$8.2 million toward its \$12 million hospice fundraising goal, said Scott Fountain, senior vice president and chief development officer for Baptist Memorial Health Care. The funds will help build both the new hospice and the grief center, and fund their operations for two years.