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## *Helping others cope with grief*



CHRIS ROSSI/THE GAZETTE

Penny Gladhill of Damascus (right) founded Hospice Caring Inc., and Jeannette Mendonca of Damascus is executive director of the Gaithersburg nonprofit that helps individuals and their families through the end of life.

## Damascus women lead hospice volunteers

BY SUSAN SINGER-BART  
STAFF WRITER

Penny Gladhill of Damascus describes herself as a mother, grandmother and volunteer.

But that understates her importance in spurring hundreds of others to help people faced with a life-threatening illness and their families, as well as those grieving the death of a loved one.

Gladhill founded Hospice Caring Inc. of Gaithersburg in 1989, four years after the death

of her best friend, Lois P. Rockwell.

"When you lose your best friend, you really lose a lot," Gladhill said.

The two had been inseparable since they moved into their Damascus subdivision around the same time in the early 1970s, she said. Rockwell founded Damascus Y-Women, and Gladhill was her vice president.

Damascus Y-Women, with its weekly program meeting and speakers, helps empower mothers and housewives, Gladhill said.

Gladhill became president of Y-Women and also trained as a caregiver after reading about nonmedical hospice care in Frederick County.

She convened the first meeting of Hospice Caring in her basement in August 1989, establishing the first hospice program in Montgomery County.

Some 22 years later, the nonprofit is housed in a cozy cottage on the grounds of Bohrer Park in Gaithersburg, and another former Y-Women

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## HOSPICE

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president, Jeannette Mendonca, 57, of Damascus is its executive director.

Mendonca called Gladhill and Hospice Caring's then-executive director Lisa McKillop in February 2009 when her father, who lived out of the area, was diagnosed with a terminal illness.

"I needed the best advice on how to help him and help the family," she said.

Mendonca resigned her job as development director for the National Park Trust to care for her father. After his death four months later, "I realized how devastating it was to lose a parent," Mendonca said.

She became a Hospice Caring volunteer.

In late June, McKillop said she was retiring and asked Mendonca to take her place.

"In many ways I feel this is my father's final gift to me," Mendonca said.

The support system that has grown around Gladhill's original idea is amazing, she said.

"Penny is truly an angel," Mendonca said. "It's humbling to work here, the hours the volunteers give."

Hospice Caring has four full-time and three part-time paid staffers, she said. Most of its work is done by more than 400 trained volunteers.

The staff dispenses TLC and support to the volunteers, said Karen Novak of Bethesda, the volunteer coordinator.

Officially Gladhill is the director of volunteer development and training and director of Camp Caring, a summer camp for grieving children.

"It's your personal gift if you're drawn to this work, that's all it needs," Gladhill said. "If you have a gift, we'll give you the tools."

There is a place for everybody, she said. Volunteers who do not want to work with patients and families can help in the office or with special events.

Among the free services the group provides are transportation, meals, breaks for caregivers and comfort. Hospice Caring works with all the medical hospices in the county, Mendonca said.

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"Almost every program we have comes from people needing something and working for it," Gladhill said.

Grieving families get together weekly at the cottage to support each other. Good Grief Clubs offer programs in schools for grieving children.

"Statistics show children who don't cope with their grieving don't do well in school," Mendonca said. "We facilitate peer support for these children, we're not grief counselors."

When Mendonca became the executive director, she could see fundraising needed major work, she said. In 2009, the group took in \$226,280 in contributions, grants and investment income and other revenue and spent \$366,440 on salaries, fundraising and other expenses, according to its 2009 income tax return.

The nonprofit has a budget of \$493,000 for the year that ends July 30, Mendonca said.

In the past, the group relied on grants for about half its budget and an annual gala and direct mail solicitation for the rest. The heavy reliance on grants does not work anymore, Mendonca said.

She has started a number of events to help raise money and awareness of the group.

Hospice Caring will stage a spring celebration Saturday. A scrapbook day is planned for June 12 and a golf tournament for June 20.

"Every organization has its bumps — she's going to take us to the next level," Gladhill said of Mendonca. "Nobody can tell you what that's going to be."

*ssingerbart@gazette.net*

## IF YOU GO

- What: Hospice Caring Spring Celebration
- When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday (Rain date is Sunday.)
- Where: 518 South Frederick Ave., Gaithersburg
- Details: Event includes artisans and vendors, plant and flower shop, bake shop, gift gallery and a book, CD and DVD sale.
- Call 301-990-7927 or email [madeline@hospicecaring.org](mailto:madeline@hospicecaring.org).