

## Beyond Borders

Atlantic Hospice Partners With Hospice in Burundi, Africa

**H**ealthcare professionals engaged in providing palliative care often find themselves explaining that working with seriously ill patients and those near the end of life, however challenging, is also a source of strength. Though not necessarily religious in nature, the work is inevitably spiritual; it often inspires dramatic changes and extraordinary efforts in its practitioners. This is evident in Kathleen McMahon's development of Atlantic Hospice's supportive relationship with a hospice center in Burundi, Africa. The personal nature of palliative caring finds its most powerful expression in the work of the nuns of St. Elisabethe Hospice who, amidst Central Africa's extreme deprivation, offer their dying patients their own living quarters and food.

Committed to expanding access to hospice care not only locally but abroad, Atlantic Hospice has become the only New Jersey hospice with a partnership in Africa by connecting with St. Elisabethe Hospice, the only such resource in a country of eight million people. Life expectancy in Burundi is 41 years, and many people there die of malnutrition, malaria, and AIDS. St. Elisabethe must regularly turn away people for lack of resources or an available bed; the 30-bed facility currently has more than 50 patients.

Conditions for Burundi patients are severe. Patients typically have no living relatives and arrive at the hospice wearing little to nothing. There is no running water for hydration, and diarrheal illness is endemic. St. Elisabethe is one of the poorest hospices in the world, with few resources to provide electricity, cooking wood or coal, water, food, or burials. Nuns who both live and work at the hospice feed patients out of their own food budgets.

The partnership and fund-raising efforts of Atlantic Hospice provide St. Elisabethe Hospice with educational and financial support. This enables the hospice there to provide food, medical care, and healthier living conditions for its patients; expand its facilities; and increase their outreach in Burundi. Because of the formal partnership with Atlantic Hospice, St. Elisabethe Hospice now qualifies for access to other resources from Foundation for Hospices in Sub-Saharan Africa (FHSSA).

The driving force behind Atlantic's involvement with St. Elisabethe is Sister Marie Cooper (Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny) of Westfield. She has a longstanding relationship with the African hospice through her





religious work, and travels there several times a year. Her discussions with Atlantic culminated in the partnership's official designation by the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization last June.

Kathleen McMahon, Atlantic Hospice nurse practitioner, directs the project. Fund-raisers, including a successful benefit at Overlook in November, have been held on St. Elisabethe's behalf and preliminary marketing materials for the project have been developed. When Sister Marie traveled to Burundi last February, she made a video about the hospice, which Atlantic has edited. She also brought with her a portable, battery-operated DVD player to show the Burundi hospice patients and staff the people and facilities involved in the project at Atlantic.

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Atlantic's Kathleen McMahon hopes to visit Burundi next year, with a grant from the Benjamin H. Josephson MD Fund. Among the supplies she plans to bring is cotton for women's clothing and flip-flops. This will allow female patients at St. Elisabethe to change clothes twice a day. She also intends to dance for and with the patients; she teaches dance, and in Burundi dancing is a common means of expression.

McMahon describes the impact of her relationship with the Burundi program as profound: “It's made me much more aware of differences between the Western and developing world. There is limited access to a resource as basic as water. The nuns in Burundi not only have to feed and clothe the patients, but give up their housing to give the dying their own space. And they dig all of the graves themselves.” Yet she also appreciates that “developing countries have in their culture priorities we have lost.”

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For more information about Atlantic Hospice's partnership with St. Elisabethe Hospice in Burundi, Africa, or to request a speaker or make a donation, contact Kathleen McMahon, MEd, MA, RN, CHPN, CNS, at (973) 379-8473.