

More than Medicine

Our Palliative Care Team Makes Wedding Wish Come True

Many people, when faced with the fact that they're dying, believe or are told that there is nothing else that can be done. But the [Palliative Care team](#) at Northwestern Memorial Hospital uses that time to help patients reframe their thoughts and refocus on what hope means for them. The team is dedicated to helping patients get through their last days, weeks or months by making sure their physical symptoms are managed as best as possible and working with them to find out what is important to each and every one of them.

Most patients have simple requests. Sometimes their wish is to be comfortable, or to be at home. No matter what the request, the team will do whatever they can to make their patients' dying wishes come true – often giving their own time outside of work hours and even their own money to make a wish a reality.

Recently, the palliative care team helped plan and organize a bedside wedding ceremony, complete with a wedding dress, flowers, cake, decorations, and of course, family and friends. One of their patients, 32 year-old Anna Moukhina, had always longed to wear a beautiful, long wedding gown and have her family and friends present as she and the love of her life, Alex, exchanged wedding vows.

Anna and Alex had planned to have a wedding in Las Vegas, but unfortunately Anna was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor, and she could not get to Vegas to make her dream come true. Her family wasn't planning to join the Vegas celebration, but when Anna couldn't make it to Las Vegas because of her illness, her family was invited to the hospital celebration. Her sister, her parents and her friends gathered together to help them celebrate their day. Anna's neurologist, [Sean A. Grimm, MD](#), also attended the ceremony, during which Anna called him her hero.

Compassion in Action

Once the palliative care team learned about Anna's wish, they sprung into action. The entire team, from nurses to doctors to the social worker to the chaplain, joined together to plan and organize a wedding for Anna. "The team was incredible. I can't even begin to describe just how hard everyone worked to make this wedding happen," said Korey Eckley, a social worker on the team. "Everyone just went above and beyond, and it showed."

They even found a wedding gown for Anna. Korey called many places looking for any boutique that would be willing to donate a wedding gown for the event, and she had about given up. The team had decided to purchase a gown when Korey found Bridal Boutique in Hobart, Indiana. When the owner heard Anna's story, she didn't hesitate for one minute, and she generously donated a new wedding dress.

Everyone pitched in to make this bedside ceremony as authentic as possible. One of the nurses, Patty, had her sister make a bridal bouquet, another nurse brought in some sparkling grape juice for the "champagne" toast. Another nurse, Kelly, brought in a beautiful cake that said "Congratulations" on it, the team purchased flowers, tulle and balloons to decorate Anna's bed and room, including a single red rose to put in her hair, just behind her ear, and Anna's parents and sister flew in from out of the country. The ceremony was performed by Northwestern Memorial chaplain, Jeannie Wirpsa, and there were between 20 and 30 family members, friends and hospital staff present for the wedding that, among other things, fulfilled one woman's dying wish.

Every week, to help the staff deal with the difficulties of working in an end-of-life setting, there is a grief support group, and the week of the wedding, there was a full house. Everyone wanted to talk about the experience with Anna and her wedding. It was a bittersweet event because everyone knew that Anna wasn't going to live very long. In fact, she died

just two days after the wedding. But the upside of this story is that because of the work of the palliative care team, a young woman was able to get married in a wedding dress and spend quality time with her family and friends before she died.

Although this story is not typical of what the palliative care team does, it does exemplify the teams' compassion and dedication to their patients. When other doctors say "There's nothing more we can do for you," this team says, "There's a lot we can do for you – and we will." At a time when many people are scared and feel alone, the palliative care team works to help patients and their families find ways to cope, medically, socially and spiritually, and to make the time they have left as contented and comfortable as possible. And sometimes, as they did with Anna, they are able to make wishes come true.