Patients’ Families Have Diverse Needs

by Sister Ruth

Every autumn at newsletter time, I find myself looking back over the past year. The years seem to pass so quickly now. I’m amazed that Halloween is just days away, and it will be Thanksgiving before we know it.

While the days seem short to me, I know that for many of our guests each day spent at a loved one’s bedside can seem very long indeed. The uncertainty of how long a patient will be in the hospital and, for some, how long he or she will live, brings a deep, wearying and emotional depletion—life is not only changed, but also on hold. Over the years so many people have exclaimed, “If only I knew how long this is going to go on!”

When a patient’s relatives arrive at The Family Link there may well be an anticipated length of stay, but we never really know for sure. The families stay as long as they need to and we go from day to day, unsure of when their visit will end and they—and hopefully their loved one—will be able to return home. We’re unsure, too, about when their room will be available to the next guest; unlike a hotel, our reservations are usually open-ended.

During our latest fiscal year, we counted more than 3,300 guest-nights, the statistic we call “heads in beds.” That translates to about 3,300 showers and breakfasts, thousands more cups of coffee, hundreds of loads of laundry—bed, bathroom and kitchen linens as well as the clothing guests wash themselves. It all takes a toll on this old house and its equipment, so we are fortunate to have friends who step up when things wear out and need maintenance, repair or replacement.

All of our guests arrive with unique circumstances and needs. Some just want to retreat to their bedroom, process the day and get some restorative sleep. Others crave companionship and find mutual support from other guests who understand what this journey is like. Discovering what brought a guest to our house shines a light on what a particular family has been through and may face in the days ahead.

We welcome many people whose loved one has met with a sudden illness or life-threatening accident. Everything has changed in a moment, and not just for the patient. Long recoveries from automobile accidents and falls, brain injuries, strokes and burns can take an enormous toll on a family—even more when the ill or injured person is the primary breadwinner. Other guests have been coping with a family member’s illness for a long time and that, too, extracts a heavy toll.

The hospitals in San Francisco are often the only hope for patients who live in rural communities of Northern California and the Central Valley. We are always amazed at what miracles can occur. Transplants of organs are commonplace these days, but the wait for an organ can be a long, stressful ordeal. When relatives get the call that an organ has become available they can go from despair to hope in a single bound—but the stress continues till the surgery is done and recovery begins.

A mom has spent several months with us while her adult daughter waits to have her hands and feet amputated because of a circulatory problem. Surgery has been delayed until the young woman’s lungs can withstand anesthesia. The devastating wait is brightened by the fact that doctors can now perform hand transplants!

Another patient, with oral cancer, went home with a new and functioning tongue, fashioned from muscle tissue. There is much hope now in otherwise bleak situations. But families still come to be with their dying family member, providing support to the end. They return home with hearts broken yet enlarged by compassionate love.

Our dedicated volunteers, board members and staff have been privileged to provide hospitality and succor to patients’ visiting families during their medical crises since the early 1980s. But we don’t do this alone. Generous donors are our lifeblood, with individual contributions, monthly pledges, memorial gifts and fund-raising support of many kinds. We can continue only with your help.

“All my family and I are deeply indebted to you and Family Link for your support and kindness to us so many times, until the death of my son David. We will always remember you and the priceless kindness you give to families in grief.”

Sincerely,

Wes
Houston, TX
Supper Takes a Hit as Budget Blues Persist

We cinched our already-tight belts and pared expenses deeper than ever this year. A cash-flow crisis in March was weathered only with extraordinary support from friends who responded to an urgent special appeal. Then, as summer approached, more donors helped our financial situation with their generous response to our annual appeal letter. Yet another close call.

With our annual budget already at bare-bones level, the board found new things to trim in the new fiscal year that began July 1. Most difficult was reducing our food budget. Since we moved to Castro Street in 1995 we have provided food not only for breakfast and snacks, but also for an evening meal, which many guests would not otherwise have. Eliminating dinner fare enabled us to slice a hefty 60% off our grocery bill.

Our longtime angel Allan Berenstein then stepped in with an added monthly pledge to help fill the larder, but our food budget remains meager.

Other cuts include office supplies and equipment, down from $3,000 to $1,000 (we hope nothing breaks). The Fiscal Year 2012-2013 budget totals just $189,882, down from the previous “bare bones” $195,582.

Nevertheless, with your help, The Family Link continues to fulfill its mission of providing comfortable and supportive, free or low-cost accommodation to relatives who come to San Francisco to care for patients with life-threatening illnesses and injuries. We have always done this without any government funding, relying primarily on individual donations.

Letters that our guests write us after their stay at the Family Link make it clear what The Family Link meant to them in their times of family crisis. They remind us why we all work so hard to keep going.

Searching for Funds, Thanking Our Friends

Two local foundations responded to our outreach requests in 2012 with first-time grants. We sent a letter to The Dr. Joel & Maria Fort Foundation, resulting in a nice conversation with Dr. Fort, who liked our mission and sent $5,000. The Wilsey Foundation also responded, with a $500 grant.

We also received grants from these San Francisco funders who have supported us in the past: Trust Funds Inc., $10,000; the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, $750; and an anonymous foundation, $5,000.

Other extensive efforts to find new funding sources weren’t as successful. Three grantmakers we approached sent regrets. A couple of others gave us hope but were ultimately unable to help. Mostly there was silence. But hope does spring eternal.

The board’s Grants Committee has new volunteers who are aggressively building on our earlier efforts. Several grant requests are pending, and more submittals are in the works, both to past funders and new prospects.

Beyond grants, our volunteers’ work at the 2012 Castro Street Fair will bear fruit this December when fair proceeds are distributed. Several of the volunteers are already planning to help us at the fair on Sunday, Oct. 6, 2013.

The board’s Fundraising Committee is planning new fundraising efforts for 2013.

We thank and love all of our supporters, especially the many generous individual donors who have always been our lifeblood.
Our upstairs washing machine—used by guests as well as our housekeeper, Blanca Alfaro—broke down for the final time this summer. Till this year it had always responded to the ministrations of Walter, our repairman, but it clearly had laundered its last load.

As linens piled up, Blanca conferred with volunteer Janis Berwitt, who called neighborhood dealer Cherin’s Appliance and explained our situation. Cherin’s gave us a new washer at cost, and one of our board members donated the funds. Thanks to all for helping avert a potential crisis.

You Buy, We Benefit
The Family Link benefits from a donation program of the Save Mart family of supermarkets (Lucky, Food Maxx, S-Mart and Save Mart stores). They’ve given us free S.H.A.R.E.S. cards, which we’ll soon send to our friends in California’s Central Valley, San Francisco Bay Area and Northern Nevada. Swipe the card at checkout and they send us up to 3 percent of your purchase amount, at no cost to you.

Another no-cost donation program, eScrip, sends us a percentage of sales from American Airlines, several cruise lines, and some regional grocers and other merchants across the U.S. The eScrip website shows participating businesses in your region. Just register your credit, debit and ATM cards online (Group name The Family Link, Group ID No. 3375889, ZIP Code 94114).

In San Francisco, our friends at the four Cole Hardware stores give us 10% of your pre-tax purchase when you ask them to credit the sale to The Family Link (No. 317).

Community Thrift Store, 625 Valencia St., sells your donated stuff and sends us the proceeds quarterly. Drop off items and give them our name and number (No. 15). For furniture pick-up, call 415-861-4910.

Board Transitions
We welcomed three new board members in 2012.

Lois Goodwill, Ph.D., a semi-retired clinical psychologist and published author, was looking for an agency she could volunteer with in her neighborhood. She found us! Lois is past board president and current honorary board member of the Oakes Children’s Center. Her nonprofit board experience is a valuable asset to our board.

Craig Davidson, a former chef and restaurant owner, is a recently retired paralegal. His management skills and legal background are enhanced by his energetic enthusiasm, which he is applying to our ongoing efforts to obtain new sources of funding, helping guide the work of the Grants Committee.

Darien DeLorenzo is CEO and Executive Director of Mobile Health Clinics Association, and has extensive experience in the healthcare delivery industry. She has served on the Northern California Episcopal Charities Healthcare Action Network and on the Board of Directors of Global H.E.E.D.

We’ve also regretfully accepted the resignations of three board members this year. Happily, two of them are continuing to be involved as active volunteers.

June LaBarre Montgomery, who joined the board in 2008, resigned in February to fulfill that dream—in the heart of us all—of sailing around the world. A development manager by profession, June had served as board secretary and worked fruitfully on our Grants Committee.

Denis Wade served multiple terms as board secretary and vice president during his 15-year tenure. A volunteer since he helped at a garage sale in 1987, he left the board in June following his 75th birthday. You might not notice his departure, though, since he then coordinated our volunteers for the Castro Street Fair, continues working with the Grants Committee, and is editing this newsletter, a task he’s enjoyed for many years.

Jessica Eastwood has been a volunteer since she was a little girl in 1985—a long-time friend but, sadly, a short-term board member. A school counselor and teacher, she was elected to the board in early 2012 after moving home from New York, then had to resign when time demands of a new job conflicted with Family Link activities. Happily, she continues to help as our longest-serving volunteer.

Visit us online
Our Website address is www.thefamilylink.com
Volunteers are Young and Old, Far and Near

Without volunteers, The Family Link wouldn’t exist.

Norman Strong and Sister Ruth became friends in the U.K. in 1968. They both settled in the Bay Area and remain devoted friends. Norman recently retired and volunteered to spend one day a week helping around the house. He gardens, paints, fixes, carries heavy things and does just about anything that needs a “strong” hand. He and our long-serving, twice-weekly volunteer Janis Berwitt enjoy banter that is entertaining and uplifting.

University of San Francisco professor Rebekah Dibble’s business students assist nonprofit agencies in a “service learning project.” For a third semester, a student team chose The Family Link this fall. The ambitious students—Andrew Foy, Anna Reed, Sabrina Sands and Travis Saville—are developing a sustainable marketing plan aimed at increasing community awareness, increasing donations and enhancing our public image.

This summer Alberto Wu, events coordinator for the City College of San Francisco chapter of the business honor society Alpha Beta Gamma, asked if we had tasks his group could help with. He and fellow students Kate Arzamastseva, Alicia Dinegro and Cherry Lo helped us earn money at the annual Castro Street Fair—and boosted our volunteer count for the event to 33 (which will increase our share of the money the fair distributes to nonprofits in December).

Four of those 33 Castro Street Fair volunteers look forward to driving down from Sonoma County every October to help us at the fair. Nancy Wilson, her husband, Tom, daughter, Melinda Feinstein, and friend Sue Dequine are dedicated Family Link volunteers. Nancy and Tom also send us a monthly pledge.

Other volunteers are right next door. Jan, who owns the Inn on Castro downhill, keeps an eye on our house and accepts deliveries for us. Jose and Eileen, our uphill neighbors, come over to translate for our Spanish-speaking guests.

Many others help as well, including our faithful Board of Directors.

Pennies from Heaven

Our financial situation has ranged from “slim pickin’s” to bleak over the decades, and in 2012 we once again faced the very real threat of closure. As in the past, angels appeared.

In April we received a call telling us that The Family Link had been remembered in the will of Wayne M. Corn. It has been years since Wayne hosted a fund-raising event for us, so his bequest was completely unexpected, and a timely blessing. In June we received a generous check from the estate of our late friend Archibald J. Wilson, who died in 2011.

Bequests are not a dependable way to pay the bills, but the generosity of these gentlemen enabled us to serve many families.

Remembering The Family Link in your estate planning is a gift of hospitality and hope for strangers.