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THE NEEDIEST CASES

After Daughter's Death, Helping Others Cope With Dying

By Jennifer Mascia

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Every year since 1911, New York Times Neediest Cases Fund has provided direct assistance to children, families and the elderly in New York. Articles will appear daily through Jan. 30, illustrating the difference that even a modest amount of money can make in easing the struggles of the poor.

Last year, 10,428 donors contributed \$6,280,242, which was distributed to those in need through seven New York charities.

Mustafah Abdulaziz for The New York Times

Fran Sax, at her Queens home, was devastated by her daughter's death 12 years ago.

There is an armchair in the living room of Fran Sax's apartment covered with the stuffed toys that her patients have asked her to care for: Minnie Mouse sits next to a baby doll, bobbing on a sea of teddy bears.

But Ms. Sax is a hospice volunteer and her patients are terminally ill, which means she has essentially been asked to look after them forever.

"I think hospice provides all of the things that family members cannot supply at the end of life," said Ms. Sax, 81, who worked for 48 years as a registered nurse. "And I didn't realize until it happened to me."

Twelve years ago, her daughter, Mary, a videotape editor at CBS News, died from a recurrence of Hodgkin's lymphoma that first surfaced when she was 18. "She said, 'Mom, I beat this before, I can do it again,'" Ms. Sax said. But the cancer, which was first identified in her thyroid, had metastasized to her lungs, bones and brain, and after five months of chemotherapy, she died.

"She died in my arms," Ms. Sax said. It was May 1, 1998. "She wasn't in a coma, just sleeping a lot, and right before she died she opened her eyes and turned to me and said, 'Is it O.K., Mom?' Like, was it O.K. to go? And I said, 'Yes, it's O.K.' "

"We were best, best friends," Ms. Sax said. They lived two blocks apart in Flushing, Queens. "We ate dinner after work every night. It was a great loss."

The death of a child is said to be one of the most painful experiences imaginable. But instead of running from her grief, Ms. Sax ran toward it. A year after her daughter died, she became a hospice volunteer with

the Community Service Society's Retired Senior Volunteer Program, comforting the ill as their deaths approached. At first, still traumatized by losing her 41-year-old daughter, "I told them I didn't want anyone under 65," she said. "That's how I handled it," she continued.

Her first patients were women with Alzheimer's, but she could not handle watching the harrowing mental deterioration that accompanies the disease. Ms. Sax has since become such an expert on the needs of the dying that she now coaches less-experienced volunteers on how to handle the emotional gravity of the work.

Ms. Sax estimates that 75 percent of her patients have accepted their deaths, especially if they are religious. But Mary, she said, did not. "Even when she was getting worse, she still clung to hope," Ms. Sax said.

Perhaps the desire to foster the acceptance that Mary lacked is what propels Ms. Sax to the bedside of the dying so many years after her daughter's death. She attends to patients in their homes, reading to them, playing Scrabble with them and lending an ear for their end-of-life family squabbles, which she said erupted more often than people might think. "Many times I feel more like a social worker than a volunteer," she said. She takes on three patients at once, and they are usually days or weeks from their deaths. Sometimes they hang on for a year or more, and she attends their wakes.

But the intensive care unit is her favorite place. There she sees end-stage patients, most of whom are unconscious.

"If I play music, sometimes they respond a little bit," she said.

Every two months, the Community Service Society, one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, gives Ms. Sax \$216 to refuel her 17-year-old Plymouth.

Ms. Sax said she was not religious, "even less so after losing a child."
"But I believe in kindness," she continued. "I believe in the golden rule."

Her kitchen cabinets are covered with quotations from Plato, the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), Aesop and James Barrie. A quotation by [Ernest Hemingway](#) seems to exemplify her.

"The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places," she read, smiling proudly.