

Numbers of Buncombe, Western North Carolina Residents Living with Serious Illness on the Rise, says Four Seasons Compassion for Life

ASHEVILLE, N.C., Aug. 7, 2013 (SEND2PRESS NEWSWIRE) – North Carolina area services, options and support result in relocation of patients in need of long-term care options, says Four Seasons Compassion for Life. Fewer than 15 minutes: That's how long it took for a Virginia neurologist to tell Karen Zimmerman, then 51, a member of the Board of Directors of the National Alzheimer's Association, the results of her medical tests.

The conversation went something like this: "I'm sorry to tell you, ma'am, but you have young onset Alzheimer's disease. Don't worry, you have many years of productive life ahead of you." Then, as the physician wrote out two prescriptions, he said, "You're not going back to work ever."

There was no follow-up, recalls her husband, Keith Holdsworth. Zero.

Today, Zimmerman, 56, and Holdsworth, live in the Fletcher home they began building in 2005, three years before Karen's diagnosis. Through Alzheimer's advocacy work, the couple heard North Carolina might offer the support Karen needed. Taking a closer look, and confirming their impression, they relocated to Buncombe County. Previously planning to relocate to be near their daughter, who has lived in Asheville for 15 years, they amped up their plans.

The numbers of Buncombe County residents like Zimmerman who live with the emotional and financial burdens of a long-term illness are on the rise, say regional experts. Contributing factors include the popularity of the Asheville area as a relocation destination, the region's aging population, and high mortality rates.

"Information and support for living with a serious illness is needed before an illness occurs, not after," says Chris Comeaux, CEO of Four Seasons Compassion for Life, Flat Rock, which provides assistance to those living with a serious illness through hospice or palliative care.

Zimmerman's first visit with an Asheville physician in December 2010 took more than three and one-half hours. He interviewed both Karen and Keith, weighing her evaluation, diagnostics, and the mental and physical elements associated with living with a serious illness.

The visit was "vastly different than having no information in Virginia," says Holdsworth.

Understanding Patient Needs:

Patients living with serious or long term illness aren't simply demographics

or statistics, says Comeaux. They're people first. And the experience of living with a serious illness impacts not only the person who's sick, but also every member of that person's family and extended community.

"Each person's journey through illness affects every aspect of their lives, whether their journey leads to recovery or transition," he says.

Life changes, such as family and social dynamics, can be a source of comfort or difficulty. In Zimmerman's case, relocation has been a source of comfort. Despite the isolation while Keith is working, Karen has developed a network of neighbors and friends, and has taken up pottery as a hobby.

"The kindness of people here is off the charts," says Holdsworth.

As a long term illness progresses, everyone involved may feel emotions, including the person who is seriously ill. The patient can experience anger and loss deeply as they watch health and well-being slip away. Others, remain determinedly hopeful.

"I'm optimistic, keep things going, and take life one day at a time," says Zimmerman. "There's just no other way to do it on this mountain. I just keep on doing and keep on doing."

Right now, she's putting up berries.

"I pull out the food, and the food is good." She adds, "Right now, in my hands, I have a half a pint of blueberries. I've got 40 quarts put up."

She sees the richness of life on "my mountain" as viable confirmation that the course they've chosen is the right one. As Zimmerman's needs change, so will the choices. Holdsworth is already thinking ahead to the resources needed to manage Karen's symptoms as they increase.

"Patient needs encompass symptom management as well as the practical, personal considerations, whether that person is being cared for in a home, in a traditional setting such as a hospital, or in hospice," says Comeaux.

Care settings and needs are individualized based on the type of illness, prognosis, and personal situation and beliefs, says Comeaux. These include care-giving options and settings, recovery support, and more practical concerns about managing the logistics of illness, financially and emotionally.

Holdsworth says the support needs to be present for the family and caregiver who have known and loved this person as they were before the illness progressed.

"Pretty much everyone needs to see some kind of support when they see the iceberg that was the person melt away," he says.

Comeaux agrees. "The search for meaning in our lives in the face of disease is a journey which affects us all," he says.

About Four Seasons:

Four Seasons is a non-profit hospice and palliative care organization led by a dedicated team of health care professionals, social workers, spiritual care professionals and volunteers. Four Seasons currently serves patients in Henderson, Buncombe, Macon, Jackson, Transylvania and surrounding counties. For information on Four Seasons, visit <http://www.fourseasonsncfl.org/> or please call 828-526-2552.

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