

Beachwood Resident Becomes Death Doula

by Dahlia Fisher

Liz Shapiro is a death doula. Although it's not a job title she learned about in grade school, supporting people at the end of their lives came to her as a natural progression. A Beachwood resident for 21 years and a massage therapist for over a decade, Liz studied specifically to support geriatric patients in nursing homes.

Her clients often suffered from a variety of ailments and illnesses unique to an aging population, such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's, and many had mobility issues. On more than one occasion, she would arrive at a facility with her massage table in tow, only to discover that clients were taking their last breaths. As a result, Liz became open to the reality of death.

What does a death doula do?

The Cleveland Clinic's website compares a death doula to a birth doula, as follows.

"Birth doulas and death doulas function like two sides of the same coin. A birth doula is a trained professional that assists someone before, during, and after childbirth. They work alongside your healthcare team to provide emotional and physical support, education, and guidance to make sure you have a positive birthing experience.

Similarly, a death doula – also known as an end-of-life doula, end-of-life coach, death midwife or death coach – assists a dying person and their loved ones before, during, and after death. An end-of-life doula provides emotional and physical support, education about the dying process, preparation for what's to come, and guidance while you're grieving."

Making death less scary

Often, people fear death, but not Liz. Through her work as a massage therapist specializing in geriatric care, she had come to understand that everyone must eventually leave this world, so she questioned if there was a way she could use her skills and experience to make her clients' journeys to the other side more comfortable.

When her stepfather passed, she stepped in and provided the same services as a death doula would, except she didn't know there was a name for it. Signs popped up all around her pointing her in the direction of formal training. She entered a program for certification and started her business, LizA Death Doula.

The majority of her clients have thus far been middle-aged and up (although she wouldn't turn away a younger person) and predominantly are diagnosed with cancer, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, or Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS).

"Illnesses require different things," she says. "Some geriatrics need loving touch and others need range of motion (moving of the muscle tissue) or ambulation (moving from one place to another), which is where massage therapy comes into play. How ambulatory someone is will determine what kind of care they will need and how fragile they are, which can indicate how close they are to death."

Liz asks her clients what they want to be remembered for, helping them create a legacy project, which could be as simple as collecting old photographs to create a book or as complex as preparing an art installation.

She asks them what kind of sights, sounds, and smells they enjoy. If they are bed bound, staring at the ceiling, what do they want to look at? A family photograph? Their favorite painting? A beach scene? When it comes to sounds, one person might want to hear jazz on the record player, while someone else might ask to listen to birds chirping in the rustling woods. The same goes for smells. One person might be comforted by pasta sauce cooking on the stove, while someone else is delighted by the smell of fresh cut grass.

Liz's explained that people have choices about what they want their experience to be as they are dying, and there is a benefit to understanding what happens to their bodies as the process progresses. For example, a study was done that proved hearing is the last of a person's senses to stop working when the body is shutting down.

"Education is the key," she explains. "I make sure my clients are educated on what will happen on their path to death." This includes educating their loved ones.

According to Liz, families don't always know what to expect during the home hospice experience and it can come as a surprise that a home hospice nurse will



typically only come to the home once or twice per week. That can put a heavy burden on caretakers. Liz works in conjunction with the caretakers and home hospice nurses to visit on alternating days.

"My goal is to help each patient make their transition more comfortable, especially once they are bed bound. We are all going to die one day. The purpose of my work as a death doula is to make death less scary," she said.

Taking stress off the family

Liz offers support to the family before, during, and after their loved one's death. She may arrange the funeral and/or coordinate the shiva, acting as the point person for friends who want to provide meals, for example. She does whatever it takes to reduce the family's stress.

"There are no set rules. I accommodate each family's individual, unique needs, which vary," she said. "No two lives are alike and no two death experiences are alike, but what I hope to make consistent is the idea that transitioning can be peaceful."

If given the opportunity to know in advance that death is near, Liz says her mission is to create a knowledgeable, loving, and peaceful passing.



Liz's Message

"People have the right to live a quality life and the right to a quality death. My role as a death doula is to give people a quality of life in death, with the ability to die with dignity," said Liz.

If you have questions or to learn more, email Liz@lizadeathdoula.com.