

SOCIAL WORK WEEK SHORT ARTICLE CONTEST WINNER: SOCIAL WORK — MAKING A VITAL CONTRIBUTION

◆ Elizabeth Lacey ◆

The following is the winning article of OASW's 2006 Social Work Week Short Article Contest. Numerous submissions were received. Contributors were asked to feature and illustrate, with a case example, the positive impact that social workers have on people's lives. In addition, the aim of the contest was to assemble stories that will resonate with the public, and foster an improved understanding of why social work services are essential.

I am a social worker, as is the man who helped me find peace with my father in his last days of life. Mike promptly returned the voice message I left for him only moments before, and spoke in a way that was compassionate but left little question about my father's condition. He was aware that I had not seen my father for ten years, but showed no negative judgment toward me.

He told me that the doctors recommended removal of life support, and offered to meet with me to prepare for a visit with my father. He encouraged me to do what was right for me and was available to answer any questions I had.

Later that day, I met Mike in his office. Quickly, he created an environment of safety — a great comfort — since I had never seen anyone on life support. Mike told me of the heart attacks, surgery, infection and an additional surgery that necessitated removal of my father's sternum.

Before escorting me to the ICU — where a man who looked nothing like my father lay — Mike prepared me by describing in detail what I would see. He told me that my father had been unresponsive, with multiple major organ failure for fifty days and that it was unlikely he would know I was there.

His work day ended at four o'clock but, by the time I made a tentative decision to

see my father, it was five. He seemed not even to notice the time as he led me toward my father's room. I stopped numerous times, unsure if I was doing the right thing. Mike patiently waited at my side. He didn't speak, but somehow I knew he would answer any questions I had.

When we arrived at the ICU, he told me to wait as he went in to speak with the nurse. I thought he was checking to see if I could visit, given the time; however, when he returned, he told me that he wanted to ensure that my father was not having any medical procedures. The empathy Mike displayed made it possible for me to put one foot in front of the other.

I entered the room and stood quite a distance from my father's bed. When he moved his feet, fear gripped me and I had to leave. Mike said nothing but led me back to his office. He told me that my reaction was normal and that any time I wanted to come back, he would happily escort me.

Eventually, I was able to visit my father without Mike. However, I knew that he was available any time I might need him. As a social worker, Mike was a vital link in the bridge that allowed me to safely cross over and find peace with my father before he died. Social work is a profession that helps people to heal lifetimes of pain and find ways to hold onto the good in bad situations.

Elizabeth Lacey, MSW, RSW, owns Oakridge Counselling in London where she provides individual, couple, family and group therapy.



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