

“The Disease Has Won. The Symptoms They’re Able to Manage.”

For the better part of six decades Helen Stark has been taking care of others, starting with Nelson, her husband of 58 years. After raising four boys to manhood, she turned her energies to volunteering for Sparrow Hospital. Side-by-side with her husband, she offered her strength to strangers in need of a helping hand.

In October of 1998, a biopsy revealed the lung cancer that would soon spread to her bones. For the past four weeks she has been a Hospice House resident. Characteristically, Helen Stark is spending her last days helping others, and has asked Sparrow to "pass the word."

Sparrow: You have something you wish to say...

Mrs. Stark: You know, Jack Kevorkian gets so much press, and this side doesn't get as much. I don't think it's quite fair. I understand where he's coming from. There are people who have horrendous pain. But there are also people whose pain is being managed very well. That's the part I'd like known, because mine has been. And, if you have that, why do you have any complaints? We're not going to all go on forever. These people at Hospice are meeting the need, and I appreciate it very much.

In October, when I was diagnosed, I knew right away that it was fatal. Although Dr. Hanson was honest, he was not terribly blunt. He said we're going to do everything we can to fight it, and listed the things he would do. And did them. But, he said, if that doesn't work we promise you we'll manage your pain. And I believed him. I had no reason to doubt him to this day.

We managed for six months very well, then came over here. We're still managing.

I hear you're kind of a rabblrouser.

Oh really? What did I do?

A nurse told me you talk to patients...

I tell them like it is. I don't understand why they don't already know that. I'm lying here thinking about what is our life-cycle? [She draws in the air with her hands.] Is it a circle? Is it elliptical? Is it like the pathway in the atlas that goes around the planet? It can't be just a straight line that drops off someplace. It has to connect. Because I could feel, early on when I wasn't even ill, a kind of sense of pulling away from a shore. I was disengaging in a strange way that's hard to describe. I knew I wasn't... I just knew life was ceas-

ing. I was beginning to pull back.

That's where I came from. That's why it wasn't as daunting, when I heard the diagnosis, as it could have been. Did you ever hear that before? These are the things I think about, and wonder about. And why not? Who's to say I shouldn't? Nobody. That's the neat part about it. I've had almost 80 years. I'll be 79 in the fall. Jam-packed years, with World War II and raising boys, and travel, and all manner of good things. So I have a whole, long movie to watch and I can rerun it and retape it and do whatever I want with it.

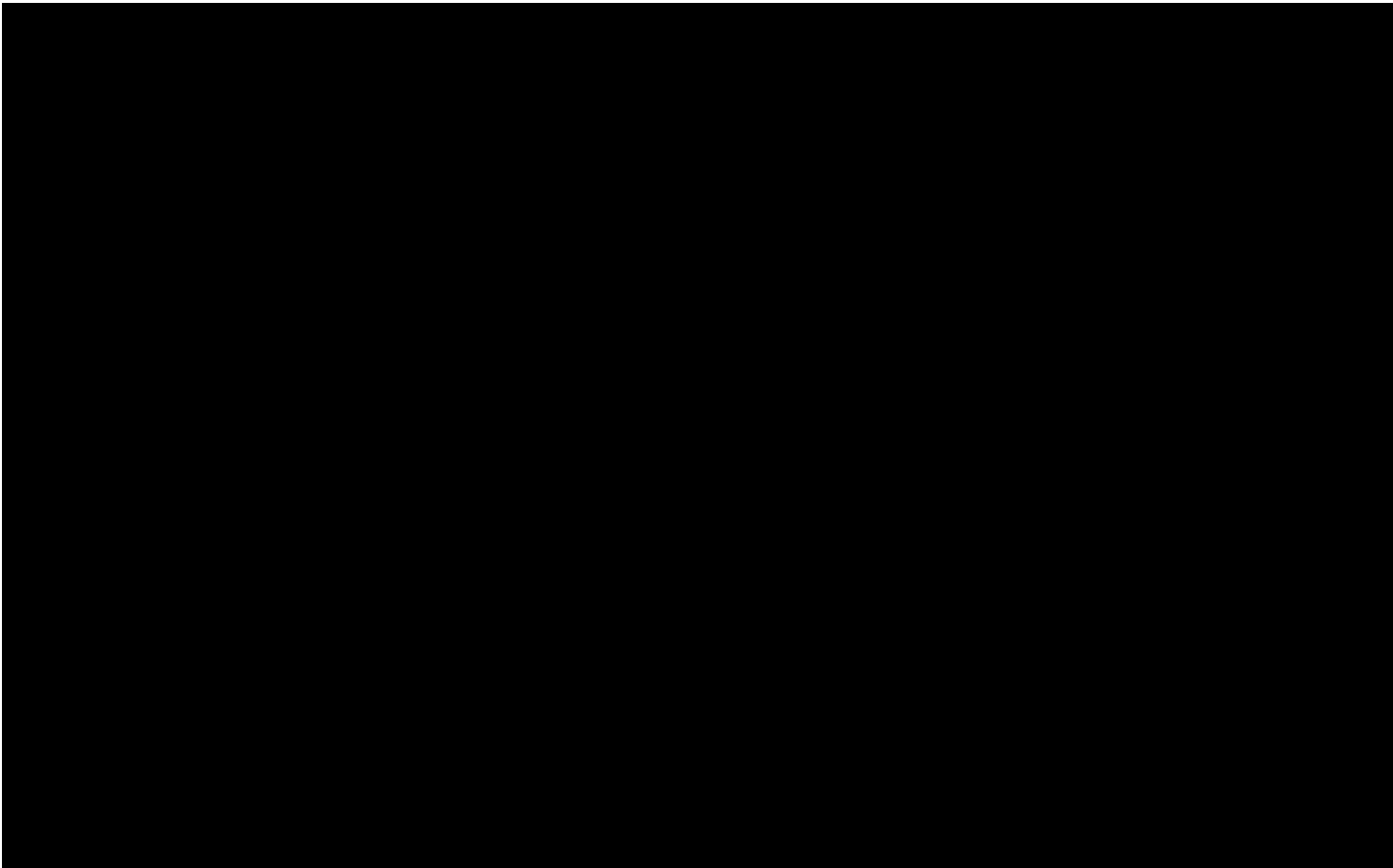
Let's take a break so we don't wear you out.

I do wear out. I'm beginning to have a little more pain than I had and I have to have more medication, and that makes me less lucid. Which is not a feeling I like. I like to know what I'm saying and mean what I'm saying.

But you feel like you've had control?

Yes. Definitely. And I've had outstanding people supporting me. This... I can't say enough for the staff of both these facilities. Of Sparrow Hospital itself as they were fighting the disease, and this facility, deciding they would fight the symptoms. The disease has won. The symptoms they're able to manage. That's the thing that is different from what has been there in the past. They used to say you can have pain medicine in two hours. They don't say that now. If the symptom is there, you can have it now. That makes a lot of difference.

I had three resident doctors in here. The word death is terrifying to them. They don't even really know that much about life yet, as they're starting out. They aren't as old as some of my children. They sat here and listened. They didn't ask a single question, because I think they don't know



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