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Local volunteer gives free haircuts to hospice patients

By [FRED SWEGLES](#)

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Arriving at the Buena Park mobile home of Jack and Mary Gaither, Phil Tovar of San Clemente delivers a smile and a free haircut.

Tovar, a cosmetologist for more than four decades, is a volunteer with Companion Hospice, a state-licensed, Medicare-certified firm based in Orange that provides comfort and care to patients with life-limiting illnesses.

Tovar figures he has driven more than 7,500 miles in the past 10 years to give free haircuts to hospice patients around Orange County. He does it on his days off from Haircrafters in Laguna Hills. His professional name is Patricio.

"I was privileged to work with rock stars and princesses of Mideastern countries," he said, "and I have to tell you, after 45 years of doing my practice, these hospice visits to people like the Gaithers mean the world to me. It's the best thing I've ever done, actually."

Since 2000, Tovar has provided free haircuts to about 180 patients, according to Jerry Peay, director of volunteers for the hospice. Tovar's time with some may be fleeting, as the average length of stay in hospice care is 22 to 24 days, Peay said. On the other hand, one cancer patient has been with Companion Hospice for three years.

"I like when I can go back and see them smile," Tovar said. "It gives me back more than I give."

Mary Gaither, 91, is one of Companion Hospice's longer-term clients, just over a year. She has Alzheimer's disease and is unable to care for herself.

Her husband, Jack, 87, remains at her side after 57 years of marriage. They hire a 24/7 caregiver. Companion Hospice provides a professional nurse and social worker, plus visits from volunteers.

"I got into it because my wife," Tovar said. "Kathy is a hospice caregiver for almost 20 years now. She asked me one time if I could come and trim up one of her patients. Once I started doing it, I got hooked on it. It's the greatest passion I've had in my career. It's very fulfilling."

He said he strives to give his hospice clients comfort and a good feeling about themselves, making them look their best.

"He gives you the best haircut you can get," Jack Gaither said.

Jack gets out for an occasional breakfast and for Bible study. Otherwise he is with Mary.

"She never leaves the house," he said. "She stays in that chair all day. She is a real princess, I'll tell you that. People with Alzheimer's, you should talk to them. I tell her all the time how much I love her and

appreciate her, and that helps me, too."

He said he appreciates the hospice care and the volunteers' visits.

"I can't say enough good things about them," he said. "These visits keep us above the flow."

Tovar feels the same about the Gaithers. "They have blessed me with their warmth and their good feelings," he said. "They are always so gracious with me."

Mary Gaither doesn't say much. Asked how she spends her days, she said, "I watch him!"

On Tuesday, she volunteered that Tovar had done a nice job on her hair.

"She's more beautiful with this haircut than the one she used to have," her husband said. "Her face is fuller now. She's more beautiful like that now. That's wonderful."

ABOUT VOLUNTEERING

"We were very fortunate to have Phil as our designated haircutter volunteer. It's always nice to have volunteers like him who can go outside the box of normal hospice volunteers. I have volunteers who sing, do manicures, do light massages – a variety of items – and all attend the training, so they really understand what they will see and how to react to each given situation.

"I had a volunteer several years ago who did birthday parties for our hospice patients with cake, balloons, gifts and pictures. She loved it and the patients and families loved it. It fit what she wanted to do, and we made that happen. It was a win-win situation, but I didn't actually recruit her for that. She started out as a hospice volunteer, and then it evolved from there.

"My job is to make the volunteer happy, but also to make the patient and family happy. I call it 'matchmaking.'" – *Jerry Peay, Companion Hospice*

For information about volunteering and training, call 714-560-8177 or visit www.companionhospice.com.

Contact the writer: fswegles@ocregister.com or 949-492-5127