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Woman's dying wish: to share solace

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If you knew your life's end would be sooner rather than later – within months, weeks, days – what would you do? How would you behave?

After learning this past winter that her time was short, Julie Kieffer of Crystal Lake found a way, in her own twilight, to benefit others facing theirs.

Kieffer, who is 50, suffers from a rare form of head and neck lymphoma. The cancer has spread. The condition is terminal, and since late February, she has received in-home care from Hospice & Palliative Care of Northeastern Illinois, said her husband of 31 years, Steven Kieffer.

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Contacting friends and family via Facebook and e-mail, Julie Kieffer swiftly raised several hundred dollars. Her mission? To buy sets of the "Sunrise Earth" series of Discovery Channel DVDs.

The non-narrated shows feature the sights and sounds of sunrises at scenic spots around the globe. It was Julie Kieffer's wish to donate these to Hospice for use by others facing end-of-life care.

Julie Kieffer was too sick to take the phone Thursday, her husband said. But Hospice quoted her in a news release as saying: "The videos are so calming and beautiful to watch. They are perfect for people like me who can't go out, but who can experience what it's like to watch the sun rise in very cool places."

According to Steven Kieffer, among Julie Kieffer's favorites is an episode shot in Peru, featuring llamas.

Julie Kieffer, a former bookkeeper for The Salvation Army, raised enough in a matter of weeks to buy four complete sets. Funds no longer are being solicited, Steven Kieffer said, noting that it did not surprise him that his wife found a way to help others even as she still was absorbing the worst possible news.

"She's been amazingly strong throughout the entire ordeal," he said.

Julie Kieffer originally was diagnosed in 2008, underwent a rigorous regimen of radiation and chemotherapy, and for a time, seemed cancer-free.

Then, this past winter, her leg began to hurt.

"[Doctors] realized the cancer had metastasized into the bone," said Steven Kieffer, who is 51 and fell in love with his wife during their years at Crystal Lake Central High School.

Dawn Lassiter-Brueske, public relations manager for Hospice & Palliative Care of Northeastern Illinois, said the agency looks forward to the donation.

It is one that Steven Kieffer said he believes will serve his wife's intended purpose.

"I thought it was a great idea," he said, adding that he and his wife have greatly appreciated Hospice's presence.

"If I could make any recommendation to anybody, it would be to call them sooner, not later," he said. "There's so much they can do ... it's not just about treating the body. It's about treating the mind and the spirit."

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