

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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PERINATAL HOSPICE: ENCOUNTERING AND COMFORTING INFANTS AND FAMILIES

By Barbara Sella, Associate Director

Legislative hearings are valuable means of educating the public. During a June 2 hearing in the State Capitol for the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act (companion bills Senate Bill 179 and Assembly Bill 237), those present learned about a little-known but invaluable program known as perinatal hospice. The bills would protect unborn children at and after 20 weeks from painful abortions and would require that families be informed about perinatal hospice.

Those present at the hearing heard from Cori Salchert, a nurse who in 2007 created a perinatal hospice program at St. Nicholas Hospital in Sheboygan, which is part of the Hospital Sisters Health System (HSHS). Called HALO or Hope After Loss Organization, the program accompanies women and families who receive a diagnosis that their unborn child has a serious or fatal abnormality, and it helps them find hope and healing in the midst of their grief.

At the hearing, Cori described caring for children with heartbreaking medical conditions. “Babies born without a brain or skull, abdominal contents floating in a bubble outside their bellies, no limbs, decayed skin sloughing off because they’d died in the womb weeks before being discovered.”

In a subsequent interview, Cori explained her mission: “The babies are going to die, but how they are cared for and the family is supported makes all the difference. Each child is made in the image of God and they should be afforded the dignity that God says they deserve.” After babies are born, HALO nurses dress them, wrap them in blankets, and bring them to their parents who sometimes hold them for hours. According to Cori, the families “walk away with a sense of their baby’s beauty.”

When parents are too overcome with grief to see and hold their babies, the children are cared for by nurses until they take their last breath. If children are strong enough to go home with their parents, HALO staff continue to assist them. Those who die in hospital are given a proper burial. HALO photographs every child and creates a memory box for each family. In June, the hospital invites families to a memorial service at Holy Cross Cemetery.

After a life threatening illness forced Cori to leave her hospital work, she used her nursing skills to care for an infant girl whose mother had left her at the hospital under Wisconsin’s safe haven law (<http://safeplacefornewborns.org>). “I couldn’t call myself pro-life and not help mothers who were unable to care for their newborns,” Cori explained.

Cori and her husband became licensed medical treatment foster care parents in order to make Emmalynn Rae a part of their family. Emmalynn lived with the Salcherts for the remaining 50 days of her life. Born without the right and left hemispheres of her brain, Emmalynn died in Cori's arms having known only the love, warmth, and compassion of the Salchert family and their many friends.

Today Cori and her family are caring for Charlie, who just celebrated his first birthday. Their ministry embodies what Pope Francis has called the “culture of encounter”— loving and accompanying those who are suffering and marginalized.

Imagine if every hospital in Wisconsin had a HALO program and if there were more families like the Salcherts to foster and adopt children with special needs.

To learn more about perinatal hospice, go to www.perinatalhospice.org.

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