



Jennifer Slaughter, founder of Perenity

WITH THE RIGHT MOTIVATION, the simplest of hobbies can grow into a real passion for giving back. Jennifer Slaughter has found that to be true with her flower ministry

Perenity, which she has nurtured since the summer of 2000.

"I'm an avid gardener and one Sunday afternoon my husband said, 'it's a shame that you don't share your flowers,' so I guess that's where the seed was planted," Jennifer says. Her husband also invented the name and designed the logo.

"He took two words, perennial and eternity, and put them together because perennial means the tops are going die but the roots you planted are still there, just like life. Eternity means your roots, your legacy, will be here forever."

For six years now, the Birmingham, Alabama-based ministry has enhanced the lives of homebound hospice patients while prolonging the life of beautiful flowers.

"I just got to thinking that it was a great idea," she remembers of her decision to start Perenity, after first looking for an existing organization to partner with and finding nothing. Though she'd had no personal experience with hospice, Jennifer chose to focus there, working specifically with New Beacon (formerly, Unity) Hospice. "I

more than just flowers

One woman's passion creates gifts of hope

BY MELISSA BROWN PHOTOS BY JACKSON ECHOLS

talked with the volunteer coordinator who was so receptive and amazed that I just wanted to do this for them."

With her blossoming garden, Jennifer was off and running, using her own flowers that first year, averaging 40 vases a week, and funding the work herself, as she still does.

From the beginning, word about Perenity has spread mostly by mouth. Several years ago, Jennifer and her graphic designer husband Terry opened a mission-based gallery in Birmingham called Gallery Terrence Denly with all the profits benefitting missions in which they were involved.

"Perenity had a room there with our mission statement on the wall," she says. "I started getting calls from florists and brides not knowing what to do with wedding flowers, and here I was willing to pick up their flowers."

Perenity has become a full-time job for Jennifer, who retrieves most of the flowers herself, with help from a few close friends. (A task made much easier by her husband's gift of a van for Mother's

Day 2005). Weekends are a whirlwind of pickups, sometimes as many as eight weddings. Once she collects the flowers, their transformation from huge centerpieces into dozens of individual arrangements begins. Her basement workroom is cozy, tight even, and it quickly fills with vases that spill over into the rest of her historic home.

Jennifer's draws range from small to abundant. One year, she collected 16,000 red tulips from the Mercedes Benz Parts Banquet, thanks to friend (and florist on the job) John Davis.

For someone who's "not an arranger," it was "easy, I just bunched them in a vase!" she explains. Each week, Jennifer averages anywhere from 50 to 400 arrangements, the most she's made in one week. Easy it may be, but fast it is not, as anyone who has arranged flowers knows.

"You have to prep them, cut them, and submerge them in water to bring them back. I get organized by sorting the flowers so I know what I have. I can do it quickly now," she says with the enthusiasm of experience. As for containers, she uses "anything that'll hold a flower, even mayonnaise jars."

Jennifer often receives bequests of funeral flowers from patients who have received her flowers while in hospice. Once again the cycle of giving continues to spread hope and joy to others through Jennifer's hands.

"Those flowers are definitely special ones," she says reverently, "not exotic or expensive, but they make sweet arrangements."

In addition to flowers, Jennifer has found a festive way to bring light into the lives of those suffering from a final illness at Christmastime.

"The first year nothing was blooming in my garden so I bought 12-inch Christmas trees to decorate and give to the patients instead. I usually do 350 of these now," she says. She tries to personalize each tree, maybe with a certain hobby as a theme.

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One particularly poignant memory of tree gifting stays with Jennifer every year.

"A few years back I used these cute little glass hummingbird ornaments on a tree that I wanted to keep for myself," she says sheepishly. "The New Beacon coordinator Greg called and told me that one of the news channels wanted to do a story on me delivering a tree to a patient. 'Pick a special tree,' he said, and I knew immediately it would be that one. The day before, he took me to meet Virginia Hayes, who suffered from congestive heart failure. Once I walked into her small home, I saw she had hummingbirds everywhere, and I couldn't believe it! The next day, I brought the tree and we just cried. I had a relationship with this woman and took her flowers every week until she died," she relates.

Each Christmas, her family tree includes one hummingbird ornament that fell off the day she took Mrs. Hayes her tree. "Every year we say a prayer for her family," Jennifer says, the tears flowing freely at the memory.

The fruits of her labor provide a much-needed spark of hope to patients who may have given up. Flowers can evoke powerful feelings, from love and gratitude to awe and memories of happier times as well.

"I remember one patient a nurse was having a hard time connecting with, but after she brought the bouquet, the woman just opened up about how she and her father used to garden together. It helped the nurse care for her the way she needed to," Jennifer recounts.

Though picking up and arranging thousands of flowers a week sounds daunting, Jennifer presses on because of these experiences and the knowledge that she is impacting people. Not just the patients, either.

"I have so many stories of God touching my life through this," she says with humility. Six years and 20,000-plus arrangements later, "my spirit is strong; my passion is strong, though my feet get tired," she observes, with a shrug of her shoulders, "He just keeps supplying me." *

To contact Jennifer to donate or lend a helping hand, please call 205-979-0997 and check out the website: www.perenity.com.



CLOCKWISE: Peony placement completes the arrangement. A plastic bottle carrier donated by Coca Cola proves perfect for transporting individual arrangements. Jennifer's customized van handles myriad pickups and deliveries.

