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The Bloom Project delivers beauty and joy to hospice and palliative care patients

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Recycling is currently trendy but The Bloom Project, a nonprofit based in Bend, OR, is re-purposing a special product that most people don't immediately think of as recyclable — fresh flowers.

Blossoms donated by local florists, special events, wholesalers, supermarket floral centers and growers are rearranged into new bouquets by trained volunteers and then delivered to patients in hospice and palliative care centers.

The organization began in November 2007 when the founder, Heidi Berkman, experienced the death of a loved one. After sharing with friends (who had also lost loved ones in end-of-life care) her desire to bring beauty and joy to those in their final days, Berkman created The Bloom Project in order to re-use flowers that would otherwise be thrown away.

“After 23 years in the meeting and event planning industry, I saw countless beautiful arrangements discarded,” said Berkman in a news release. “Around the same time, someone very close to me was being cared for by hospice. I saw firsthand how all of those wasted flowers could bring joy to patients and their families.”

The mission of The Bloom Project is simple — to bring fresh flowers to hospice and palliative care patients in order to encourage them during those difficult times.

“Some actually ask to hold [the bouquets] in their hands — to bury their faces in them, because it is

that simple reminder of something that is alive,” Berkman told *The Produce News* about the powerful effect that flowers have on the dying. She believes that the blossoms affect patients so deeply because beauty touches everyone in some sort of way. “Knowing that something is alive and flourishing in the room and knowing that it is coming from perfect strangers who are thinking of them [the patients] — it’s really powerful,” said Berkman.

The gift of fresh flowers impacts the entire family as well. “What we find to be one of the key benefits of the flowers is that it changes conversation and the focus,” Berkman said. “Oftentimes when families are spending a lot of time surrounding their loved ones during hospice care, we have found that the arrival of these bouquets is such a positive, cheerful thing that it changes the conversation away from what the family is dealing with.”

Berkman acknowledged that these floral gifts have touched everyone involved in the project, from the wholesalers to the hospice staff. “We have gotten so many notes and calls from administrators, saying that this process has boosted morale,” Berkman said.

While The Bloom Project delivers the flowers to the hospice or palliative care center, it is the nurses and staff who personally deliver the bouquets. This way, the staff ensures that the flowers’ fragrance, or any other potential allergens, will not adversely affect the patients who receive the gifts. That degree of separation from the patients also makes it more comfortable for The Bloom Project volunteers, many of whom may still be grieving family or friends they have known who received end-of-life care.

“It’s a really wonderful way to give back and at the same time there is that barrier,” Berkman said. “Due to patient privacy, we often don’t know who these bouquets are going to unless they contact us directly.”

The Bloom Project relies heavily on its volunteers to pick up and sort flowers, create new bouquets and deliver the finished gifts to hospice staff. Berkman stresses the importance of the volunteers’ careful preparation of each arrangement.

“We provide very extensive training to our volunteers because they need to know and very carefully be able to select only the very freshest flowers to use for the bouquets,” said Berkman. Each bouquet should last between four to six days.

Approximately 250 volunteers have contributed more than 29,500 charitable hours and delivered over 78,000 free bouquets since 2009. The Bloom Project is currently providing flowers to more than 20 hospice and palliative care centers in Central Oregon, the Portland metro area and the Sacramento-Placer region of California.

Reflecting on The Bloom Project’s impact, Berkman said, “It’s a game changer for our hospice partners so that they can better work with the families and patients and provide the true care that they are designed to deliver.”

For more information, go to thebloomproject.org.

