When life’s journey is near the end, our bodies cannot always carry us where we’d like to go without a little help from our friends.

Thanks to the Sentimental Journey program, Rice Hospice patients are finding the help they need to visit people, places, and memories one last time, often to say goodbye.

**How does it work?**

When visiting their patients, Rice Hospice nurses, social workers, hospice aides, and volunteers, listen to them reminisce and talk about what doesn’t seem possible or what they can no longer do due to their illness. Staff ears especially tune in when they hear a sentence that begins with the words “I wish.”

It may go something like this: “I wish I could see my granddaughter get married,” or “I wish I could spend Christmas at home.” It may be as simple as, “I wish I could see the crops in the field.” For one gentleman who had been a pilot, it was, “I wish I could fly one more time.”

When hospice staff hears a wish that seems beneficial as well as possible, they contact Willmar Ambulance Service whose crews help find a way to make that patient’s wish come true.

Who may take a journey?

Sentimental Journeys are available to Rice Hospice patients who are unable to travel without medical assistance. A paramedic, an EMT, and an ambulance provide medical care and safe transport.

**Are there restrictions?**

Each journey is evaluated individually for its benefits and challenges to the patient, as well as the feasibility of granting the trip. Rice Hospice and Willmar Ambulance staff strive to provide positive experiences during a difficult time, and will do their best to grant every wish that may benefit patient care.

**How much does it cost?**

There is no charge to the patient or family. Expenses are paid through memorials and donations made to Rice Hospice.

**All I want for Christmas**

“I wish.”

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**I’d like to see the farm**

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How did the Sentimental Journey program get started?

The Sentimental Journey program has, “softened a tough old guy like me,” said Brad Swenson, paramedic with Willmar Ambulance Service. In 2010, Swenson read an industry magazine article about a Colorado program that granted final journeys to terminally ill hospice patients.

Swenson took the idea to Operations Manager Brad Hanson, and asked if they could make the program available to Rice Hospice patients. “I thought it would give closure to hospice patients and be a positive experience for ambulance crew,” said Swenson.

Hanson enthusiastically supported the idea and brought it to Rice Hospice Director Mary Beth Potter who instantly saw potential for offering the program here. “We often receive requests from patients to go somewhere and do something one more time,” said Potter, “but we hadn’t been able to meet the need due to the level of medical care most patients require at the end of life.” Hanson presented the concept to hospice staff, who loved it.

“If we can meet that need for one last journey, it helps the patient find peace,” said Social Work Program Coordinator Judie Dunlop. Hospice Nurse Deb Lippert agreed. “As patients decline, we know they’re giving up so much and we want them to have one more opportunity to do whatever they want and it’s often something simple, like seeing the crops in the field one more time.”

With Willmar Ambulance Service and Rice Hospice onboard, a policy guide was developed. They established one criterion for being granted a sentimental journey: the person needs to be a patient of Rice Hospice where travel by car isn’t possible due to the medical assistance required for his or her care. “At this stage a patient is often too sick to sit up, or has oxygen and medication needs that make their medical situation too unstable for the family to care for them during a travel,” said Potter.

Hospice’s role is to identify patients who would benefit from a sentimental journey by listening to them talk about their lives, which is something they’ve always done. “We listen to a person’s life story and we hear what’s important. We pull out a piece of the story and come together as a team to see if we can grant one last wish to the patient,” said Dunlop.

The team determines if a sentimental journey would be an appropriate and meaningful experience for the patient and family. To be successful, a journey has to be one the patient wants to take and where the family accepts that the patient will be traveling by ambulance. “This program is just one more benefit and another component in improving the quality of a family’s end-of-life journey,” said Potter. “It gives them one more memory to share together.”

The role of Willmar Ambulance Service is to provide a safe environment during the sentimental journey, which is possible through their Advanced Life Support designation. A sentimental journey crew requires a paramedic, who is qualified to administer medicine, an emergency medical technician (EMT), and an ambulance to provide the safe medical environment.

In order to participate in a Sentimental Journey, paramedics and EMTs must complete the Rice Hospice Volunteer Training Course. Eight ambulance crew members have gone through training. “When Brad told me about the program I didn’t think twice,” said EMT Tracey Watson. “I notified Day Care right away that I might need her on 24 hours notice, and I went through training. I’m absolutely onboard.”

Ideally, Willmar Ambulance Service receives 48 hours to schedule staff in order to make a Sentimental Journey happen. Time isn’t always on the side of hospice patients, however, and requests often arise on short notice. “Our staff will drop everything and make it work,” said Watson. “It’s rewarding to see what this program means to a patient and the family.”

The Sentimental Journey program has offered a new perspective on care to ambulance crew. “As an EMT you get into a truck expecting to save a life, but that’s not what a journey is about,” said Watson. “Being part of this program has made me more rounded and more accepting when outcomes don’t go our way. I’ve grown more understanding in general, and more comfortable dealing with families during emergency calls now.”

The first Sentimental Journey offered through Willmar Ambulance and Rice Hospice took place in the fall of 2010. Swenson is pleased with how the program has taken off since then.

“The gratitude from hospice patients and families is heartwarming and helps us remember why we do what we do,” said Swenson. “My goal is to make life better for somebody else.”

Rice Hospice is happy with how the program has developed as well. “Patients don’t always have time once their illness is advanced and their lives are coming to an end,” said Dunlop. “As caregivers, we need to pull out what really matters and find the way to grant a last wish. It’s a gift of time.”

Where are the fish biting?
Is the corn ready to pick?
What’s happening at the zoo?