

Giving

Flower Angels delivers joy to nursing home residents

Innovative organization repurposes wedding flowers

By Doug Karlson

Every week, Flower Angels delivers more than 200 flower bouquets to residents in nursing homes and patients in hospices throughout Cape Cod – more than 900 per month, and more than 20,000 since the charity was established in 2014. For most of those on the receiving end of the bouquets, it's the only visit they ever get.

"The people can't believe the bouquets are for them," recalls Flower Angels founder Suzanne Carter of East Dennis. "One person told me, 'I've been here for five years and no one has ever visited me.'"

It's that loneliness and isolation that prompted Carter to launch the 501(c)3 organization. When Carter's mother, Helen Carter, had to move from her non-wheelchair-accessible house in Provincetown to a nursing home, she said she would only go if Carter agreed to visit. She did. Every day for 23 months.

"That's when I realized no one had visitors," she says. "I rarely ever saw a visitor for the patients there." According to Carter, 85 percent of nursing home residents rarely have visitors. "It's shocking. The elderly should be cherished instead of abandoned."

On her visits to her mother, Carter began bringing candy from BJ's. She would wheel her mother through the nursing home to give it out.

When her mother passed away, Carter took an inheritance of \$60,000 and established Flower Angels. "I opened it to honor her," she says.

Carter was no rookie when it came to starting things. A fifth-generation Cape Codder born in her grandfather's house on Commercial Street in Provincetown, Carter was a registered nurse and single mom. To support her family, she founded the Portuguese Princess Whale Watch company. After selling that in 1995, she opened five Curves fitness centers on the Cape.

"I'm a worker, I'm a doer," she explains.



How to help

To donate, visit flowerangelsusa.org. To visit or volunteer, drop by the workshop at 851 Route 28 South Yarmouth. The best times are Monday or Thursday, 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.



Though retired, she founded Flower Angeles at age 65. "I just felt like it's never too late to do something different."

The operation began small, and gradually grew, one volunteer at a time. Originally located in a church in West Dennis, Flower Angels now occupies a cold-room-equipped storefront on Route 28 in South Yarmouth. There are now about 100 volunteers working in teams to collect flowers, create new bouquets and deliver them. There is also one part-time employee who manages the workshop.

"A lot of our designers are retired florists and artists, so they make magnificent arrangements," explains Carter.

Often, those volunteers are widowed, so Flower Angels provides them with a rewarding community and sense of purpose. Flower Angels has also teamed up with CapeAbilities of Eastham and Hyannis and Community Connections in Yarmouth, whose special needs volunteers help collect and distribute flowers.

"The volunteers are wonderful. They show up in blizzards and on hot days. It's a mission

of love," marvels Carter. "Many of them can't wait to come here."

In addition to the labor, all the flowers are donated as well. Trader Joe's was the first store to offer its expired flowers, then four Shaw's supermarkets followed suit. Carter explained that supermarkets only want to sell flowers that will last one week or more. Though the flowers donated to Flower Angels are past their "sell by" date, Carter says "they're perfectly good and they last for five days to a week."

To source their flowers, Flower Angels also reached out to wedding venues, like the Wequassett Inn, Chatham Bars Inn and Wychmere Harbor Club, and to wedding planners and officiants. Now, after three years, few brides are unaware of the charity, and many are eager to donate their wedding flowers. (It probably helped that Martha Stewart has advocated for the repurposing of wedding bouquets.)

"It's really a beautiful thing. Instead of throwing these flowers in the dumpster, we bring a lot of joy to people in nursing homes," says Carter.

Those donations are tax-deductible, too. With wedding flowers sometimes costing tens of thousands of dollars, it can be a significant savings. Those savings might encourage brides to order even more lavish flower arrangements from local florists.

"It's a win/win for everyone," says Carter. "It's really amazing how many flowers we end up with. Thousands of flowers. Van loads of flowers."

Once the flowers arrive at the workshop, usually on Monday and Thursday mornings, the old bouquets are taken apart, the flowers sorted, and new bouquets created. Rather than use vases, the arrangers prefer antique teacups and pots because the size is more appropriate for nursing homes.

The arrangements are then delivered to 30 nursing homes, assisted-living facilities, and hospices from Provincetown to Bourne. VNA Hospice and Palliative Care social workers and nursing staff also deliver Flower Angels bouquets to their in-home hospice patients. If there's an overabundance of flowers, distribution extends to Meals on Wheels.

"Recipients just love them. Their faces light up," says Carter.

Sustaining the effort is a challenge. Overhead is about \$4,500 per month, and Carter says they only just "squeak by."


"Every month we wonder how we're going to pay the rent," she says. There's also the high cost of insurance, gas, electricity and phones.

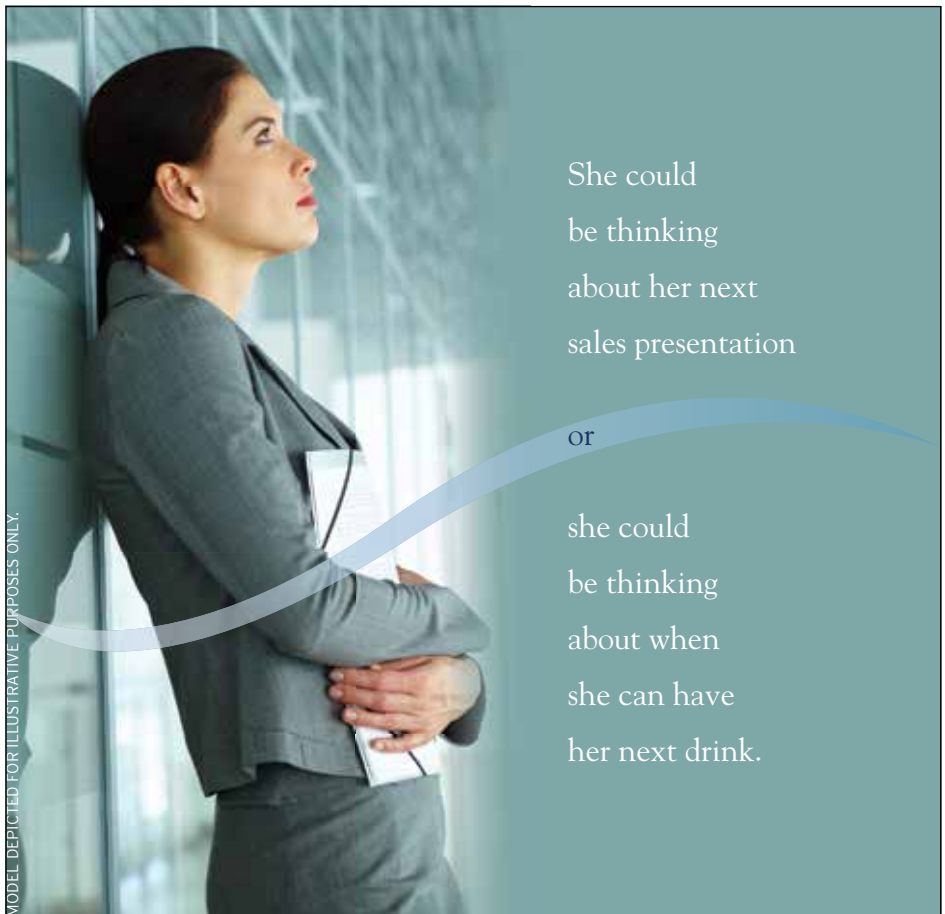
Flower Angels relies on fundraising events and donations, and are looking for more corporate sponsors. (Cape Air is currently one such sponsor.)

Last year, Carter received the New England Patriots Myra Kraft MVP Award of \$5,000, and similar gifts have come from the Hyannis Rotary Club and Royal Nursing Homes. This winter, Flower Angels will be one of the charities benefitting from the Hyannis Spectacle of Trees.

More than anything, Carter credits the volunteers for making Flower Angels possible, and says she wants to branch out to other communities. "It's become quite an amazing organization. I feel it's been blessed because it's something that's needed in society."

She recalled one day when she visited a nursing home and spoke to a 94-year-old woman. She asked the woman if there was anything at all she could do for her. "The woman replied, 'If I could have anything in the world it would be visitors, so people in the nursing home would know someone cared about me.'"

Every day, that's what inspires Carter and her volunteers. "We're trying to reduce loneliness one bouquet at a time." 



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or

she could
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BIZNOTE

Nexus Werx LLC celebrates one-year anniversary

Stefanie Cox, Principal and Founder of Nexus Werx LLC recently announced that the consulting firm has turned one year old. Nexus Werx LLC offers services for businesses, non-profits, civic groups, and political candidates, with an emphasis on teaching clients how to reach their goals. "Rather than lobbying, I teach people how to lobby. It's unique; I don't know of anyone else in the country who is doing it. It's the first time people have an option between hiring an expensive lobbyist and "winging it" on their own to advance their legislative, regulatory, or budgetary goals at the local, county, state, or federal level," said Cox. Additionally, Nexus Werx LLC works with philanthropic and socially conscious businesses to better align profitable services and products clients can offer that have a positive social impact.