



“GOD’S HAND IS IN IT ALL”

HOSPICE OF WICHITA FALLS CELEBRATES 40 YEARS OF CARE, HOPE, AND SUPPORT

Before April 1985, end-of-life care in Wichita Falls was quite different from what it is today. Caregivers primarily focused on meeting the physical needs of patients, often neglecting the emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of dying. Additionally, limited support was available for the patients' families and caregivers. This began to change in 1982 when two women, Elsa Galbraith and Joan Whitlock, recognized that hospice care could have significantly benefited friends they had recently cared for during their final days.

Hospice care began to gain traction in Connecticut in 1974. In 1982, the same year that Medicaid expanded its coverage to include hospice services, a group of medical professionals, along with friends of Elsa and Joan and other community members, gathered in Wichita Falls to discuss developing a hospice program. At that time, the concept of hospice was unfamiliar to the small Wichita Falls community, and Jan Banta was responsible for building support for the program.

“We had to do a ton of teaching within the medical community and then the community at large,” Jan said. “Because nobody knew what it was!”

Sue Baker began working for Hospice of Wichita Falls in 1989 and was present for much of its grassroots beginnings. She remembers Jan's work to educate the community about hospice care and what bringing it to Wichita Falls would mean for families.

“Jan and her committee and everybody had to go out nightly and have support groups to teach the doctors, to have that support for what hospice could do for the family, and what a great concept it was.”

But having an idea is not enough. Hospice of Wichita Falls was funded through community efforts, with its seed money coming from the Downtown Kiwanis Club. They pledged \$13,000 to start a home care hospice program, and thus, Hospice of Wichita Falls was born.

Once the community education effort began, support rushed forward like a tsunami. Jan and Sue joked about how HOWF had nothing. The community donated its time and resources to help Hospice of Wichita Falls flourish.

Jan Banta was named the first executive director of Hospice of Wichita Falls in October 1984. That December, the team trained its first group of volunteers and admitted its first patient in April 1985. The goal was to provide care and support beyond the

patient's physical needs, encompassing their mental, emotional, and spiritual needs to ensure their lives ended with dignity and compassion. From there, the demand for hospice care grew.

"I can't even describe it," Jan said. "It was my passion for many years; it was all I thought about, it was all I did, basically — just think about, 'How do we get this message out to the people in the community?' or 'How do we raise the dollars to keep it going?'" It wasn't an easy task, she said, but one accomplished by the grace of God.

Hospice of Wichita Falls expanded its service area to Iowa Park and Burkburnett in 1988 and became Medicare-licensed, a distinction achieved by only 30% of hospice programs at the time. Demand grew, leading to further expansions in 1990 to cover all communities within 30 miles, in 1993 to include Seymour and Olney, and in 1994 to all communities within 50 miles.

Hospice of Wichita Falls continued its growth in April 1994 when it received \$4 million in funding from the W. Erle and Emma White Foundation to build an inpatient care center. This enabled it to provide 24-hour patient care and to control symptoms that couldn't be managed at home.

"We weren't in any shape to take \$4 million," Jan said. "I mean, I was still cleaning the potties at Kemp street."

One of Jan's secretaries and a dear friend, Marilyn Kelley, convinced her to take Mrs. White's gift. Mrs. White called her attorneys, who sent her a 27-page fill-in-the-blank feasibility study for an inpatient center to prove that the community needed it.

"Our patient census was only 40 patients at the time. You can't justify an inpatient [center] with 40 home care patients," Jan said. "So it was, again, a plan that God had already, and so he was going to make it happen."

Jan, a former ICU nurse, faced challenges fundraising and running a nonprofit as she secured foundation funding from the Whites. Needing more funds from a capital campaign, she hired a volunteer but realized they lacked the necessary skills to run it. Determined to succeed, Jan went to the library to learn how to raise the money herself.

"If you look at all the different scenarios, there's no way it should have happened, but it did, because it was supposed to happen," she said. The community came forward again to support Hospice of Wichita Falls as it attempted to grow, and the new 12-bed facility opened in January 1997.

In the fall of 2003, Hospice of Wichita Falls launched the Building Bridges program to offer grief services to the community. Since then, they have provided various grief support services, including kids' sessions, day camps, remembrance events, online groups, and pet memorials, all at no cost, regardless of affiliation with Hospice.

HOWF experienced its next significant period of growth in the mid-2010s. Alisa Echols became the executive director in January 2010 after her predecessor, Sandy Aguirre, retired.

“Jan and Sandy both laid such a great foundation for us, and they ingrained in our heads that patient care was important, being the premier hospice in the community was *something*,” Alisa said. “Because I had been in the organization nine years prior and had such great mentors, I could just continue a lot of what they started.”

Under Alisa Echols’ leadership, Hospice of Wichita Falls was the first nonprofit to win the Better Business Bureau Torch Award for Marketplace Excellence. In June 2011, the organization opened the Elizabeth Prothro Homecare Administrative Wing and achieved its first daily patient census of 200 that October.

In August 2015, Hospice of Wichita Falls took the first steps for a significant addition that would allow it to elevate its care once again. It purchased the Sea Blue Swim Club property on Cypress Avenue, across from its main campus, with plans to build a 24-bed inpatient care center.

The *Building on a Legacy of Care* campaign was no small feat. The capital campaign raised \$15 million in 15 months from donors, the board of directors, community members, staff, and volunteers who saw the importance of HOWF's mission. The 24-bed Philbin-Prothro Inpatient Care Center opened on October 9, 2023.

“It’s just always been a blessing to me, that whatever we do, people get behind it and support us,” Alisa said.

HOWF has successfully navigated numerous challenges to celebrate 40 years of service to the community in 2025. From its early days in a small house on Kemp Boulevard to its expanded, renovated Johnson Road campus, the community has always rallied behind Hospice of Wichita Falls to help it achieve its mission.

“It is a vision, evidently, that God had, and he just used me to be a part of it,” Jan Banta said. “Because there’s just no way that it could have happened — but it wasn’t like He just did it, because I’m telling you, there was a lot of pain and a lot of worry.”

Hospice of Wichita Falls continues to develop new programs and reevaluate and improve upon current programs, remaining committed to its mission of “*Care, Hope, and Support for All When Illness Threatens Life.*”



Main Campus | 4909 Johnson Road | 940.691.0982

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www.howf.org | [@hospiceofwf](https://www.instagram.com/hospiceofwf)