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Next up for 24-hour online 'Giving Day' in O.C.? Nonprofits that help older people

The theme, "Preserving Dignity," focuses on groups that provide food, health care and hospice services, among other things.



Having their photo taken with a check for \$25,000 in the backyard of the newly remodeled Heavenly Home, located in Mission Viejo, are from left: Bruce Lazenby, executive director of business development for Rose Hills Memorial Park and Mortuary; Michelle Wulfestieg, executive director of Southern California Hospice Foundation; Shaun Moss, RN, and board member of the Southern California Hospice Foundation; and Robert Dowson, vice president for Fairhaven Memorial Services. Heavenly Home will provide low-cost end-of-life care in a homelike setting and is expected to open by next year. Heavenly Home is a first-of-its-kind hospice home Orange County. (Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG)

By **TERESA WALKER** | thwalker@scng.com | Orange County Register

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In the space of two hours, Michelle Wulfestieg accepted two ceremonial checks representing the \$75,000 in donations raised on behalf of the Southern California Hospice Foundation and its Heavenly Home end-of-life caregiving site expected to open next year in Mission Viejo.

The money is only a down payment on the 24-hour [Preserving Dignity online fundraising marathon](#) that began at 12 a.m. on Wednesday, July 14. Preserving Dignity is the latest in the ongoing series of themed online “Giving Days” that Orange County Community Foundation has structured to boost donations to local nonprofits that support specific segments of the community.

The “Preserving Dignity” theme includes seven nonprofits whose services are mostly aimed at older people: Alzheimer’s Orange County, Council on Aging – Southern California, Human Options Inc., Meals on Wheels Orange County, SoulRapha, Southern California Hospice Foundation, and St. Francis Home.

While the group goal is to raise \$100,000 during the 24-hour Giving Day window, each nonprofit can set its own goal.

Southern California Hospice Foundation’s goal is \$200,000, an amount that will help build the \$2 million endowment fund that Wulfestieg, the organization’s executive director, and advisers have determined is needed for Heavenly Home to be self sustaining and keep client costs down. Annual operating expenses have been estimated at \$500,000.

The money received Tuesday — \$25,000 from the Dignity Memorial national network of funeral, cremation and cemetery service providers, and [\\$50,000 from local supporters](#) Vana Surmanian, founder of the Hospice Guild and a longtime volunteer, and her husband Michael Surmanian — is a matching fund. So that \$75,000 given to Preserving Dignity can be doubled.

To date, the foundation has raised \$1.4 million to have the endowment in place before Heavenly Home opens its doors.

“The larger our endowment is, the less we have to charge families,” Wulfestieg said.

Though she’s just 39, Wulfestieg’s passion for hospice care sprang from [her own brushes with death](#) after suffering two strokes — at ages 11 and 25 — that left her partially paralyzed.



The 19-year-old [Costa Mesa-based nonprofit's services](#) include assistance — in the forms of food, transportation, and utility bills — to low-income people who are at the end stages of their lives. The group also grants last wishes, such as [a 2019 wedding](#) for a 62-year-old man dying from colon cancer and his longtime partner. The foundation launched its capital campaign for the Heavenly Home project in 2017.

Heavenly Home will be Orange County's first residential end-of-life care home. The terminally ill who will stay there — a group that's expected to be older — will receive formal hospice nursing care, which requires a physician's referral, through a company of their choice. But other care that's needed for someone who is weak and near death — such as meal preparation and feeding, being turned in bed, help with toiletry, and other comforts — will be provided by Heavenly Home staff at a six-bedroom Mission Viejo house purchased by the foundation in 2019.

The home will set fees on a sliding scale, meaning short-term residence will be more affordable and families will be relieved of the strain of 24-hour caregiving. For patients with no family members, Heavenly Home can help to fill that void.

Shaun Moss, a registered nurse and chief operating officer of Companion Hospice in Southern California, said hospice stays typically run less than 30 days. Moss — who sits on the foundation's board, along with Bruce Lazenby, executive director of business development at Rose Hills, and Bob Dowson, vice president of Fairhaven Memorial Services — were on hand for Tuesday's check presentation.

With renovations complete and furnishings in place, the next step for Heavenly Home is to seek a state license for residential care for the elderly. Though that can be an arduous process, Moss predicted it will be done by year's end. After that, the organization will hire staff.

Lazenby, who chairs the foundation's advisory council and is a former classmate of Wulfestieg's at Chapman University, said an endowment will help insure stability with the round-the-clock staffing of the home: "We don't want the turnover. We want to be able to afford the staff."

If the endowment fund can grow to \$5 million, Heavenly Home could offer its services free, supporters said.

"Our hope is that anybody who wants to be here can be here, regardless of ability to pay," said Dowson, who also serves as vice president for the more than 2,000-member Dignity Memorial network.



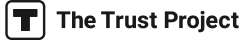
There's a good chance Southern California Hospice Foundation will reach its Preserving Dignity goal. Last year on Preserving Dignity day, the hospice foundation raised \$115,000. The goal set that day had been \$25,000.

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