

Column: Preparing for death doesn't have to be scary, especially when chocolate is involved

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Who wants to talk about death? Not me. So, when I received an invitation to attend an interactive program called “Death and Chocolate,” I had mixed feelings.

The chocolate part, I liked. Death, I can live without — no pun intended.

The program was hosted by Gayle Byck, a Deerfield-based board certified patient advocate, and Allison List Hutner, a Vernon Hills-based psychotherapist for homebound seniors and people with disabilities.

The purpose of the program was to promote end-of-life conversations — something Hutner said too often happens only in crisis.

“I have witnessed so many people getting to the end of their lives and they never had conversations about their wishes,” said Hutner, who spent 11 years working with hospice patients before going into private practice in 2014. “I’d see people pulling wills off the internet and asking for a notary at the last minute. They hadn’t given any thought to any of this and they were days away from dying.”

“If you can have conversations with your family about your wishes, you are really giving them a gift,” said Byck, who is also a certified senior advisor with a Ph.D. from University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health. “Then, people don’t have to wonder what you would have wanted and, ‘Did we do the right thing for him or her?’”

I walked into the event, which included approximately 20 participants and featured lots of chocolates on the table, wondering if I’d end up at the end of the night consumed with depressing thoughts of my will and my funeral.

Turns out, that wasn’t the case at all.

The interactive discussion, which Byck said she and Hutner adapted from “Death Over Dinner,” a program hosted by the Chicago-based nonprofit Reboot, had a

lovely start. We went around the table and each person lit a candle, said the name of a loved one who has died and shared how the person affected them.

Other topics of discussion, prompted by Byck and Hutner as facilitators followed, included these questions:

1. If you discovered you had 30 days left to live, how would you spend them?
2. What matters most to you now and what will you do about it?
3. Talk about your ideal death. Where are you? Who is with you?
4. What do you hope might be said in your eulogy?

“No one wants their life to end. It’s the ultimate procrastination,” Hutner said. “If we’re scared of it, we tend to shy away from it. But if you start to talk about it, it becomes less scary. My hope is that people become more comfortable talking about death and with that comfort, take steps to have a better death by having the necessary conversations, filling out the necessary forms and doing the necessary planning.”

Two hours and several Hershey’s kisses later, I realized “Death and Chocolate” didn’t dwell on our dying wishes at all.

Ironically, the program turned out to be a discussion about life, the people we love, the importance of living thoughtfully and gratitude.

I felt a sense of bonding with the group. At times, people laughed, giggled and cried. There was even an eruption of laughter from the group at one point — hardly what’d you expect in a conversation about death.

I still don’t want to die anytime soon but when I do, at least I’m on my way to being a little bit more prepared. I mean isn’t that what we all want? Why else do we say to the deceased, “May you rest in peace?”

“Fear of regret and unfinished business are the reasons people fear death,” Hutner said. “I watched many people die who had lived their lives to the fullest and because of that, they weren’t scared to die. It was because they didn’t have regret.”

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