



Gail Rink, Force Behind Hospice of Santa Barbara, Dies at Age 66

Longtime hospice volunteer, executive director had a passion for compassion, say friends and colleagues

By [Alex Kacik](#), [Noozhawk Intern](#) | Published on 08.02.2010

Gail Rink, who spent much of her life helping others deal with death, first as a volunteer and then as executive director of [Hospice of Santa Barbara](#), died July 27 during a trip to Montana. She was 66.

A nationally recognized leader in compassionate care and grief issues, [Rink retired in 2008](#) after eight years at the hospice helm. She was succeeded by the [Rev. Stephen Jacobsen](#).

Rink had been involved with hospice for nearly 30 years, but the tables were turned recently. Grappling with [Parkinson's disease](#), she asked Jacqueline Marston, one of the many hospice volunteers she had mentored, to be her patient-care volunteer.

"It was an honor to be a volunteer at her suggestion that I do so," Marston, board president of Hospice of Santa Barbara, told [Noozhawk](#). "She prepared me for that moment (as her volunteer)."

Rink never stopped teaching, she said. During one visit, Rink recognized that Marston was analyzing her every move and thought process. Rink remarked that she was trained well and subsequently asked her what she saw.

"I don't think you're tracking as well today," said Marston.

Rink said in response, "Well, I need to know that because I'm taking new meds today."



Marston, who spearheaded the opening of the [Villa Alamar](#) residential-care facility, cared for Rink for three months until July 13 when Rink traveled to visit her daughter, Elizabeth, in Bozeman, Mont. Scheduled to return on July 28, Rink died of complications from her disease the day before.

“The Santa Barbara community lost one of its pillars, but I lost my best friend,” said longtime friend Linda Yawitz. “She’s really going to be missed. She’s a friend I will never be able to replace.”

Marston agreed.

“Santa Barbara as a community would be vastly different (without her),” she said. “She was the one with the vision that we would have a community that was dying well, that people would have a choice in death, and agencies would come together for people in that time. She was willing to talk about the thing no one wanted to talk about.”

Rink handled death like any other aspect of her life — with honesty and humor, turning a scary transition into a pleasant experience. She treated each patient and every family with care and respect to ease the process, Yawitz said.

Gabriela Dodson, who also had been mentored by Rink and is now hospice’s clinical director, said Rink paid close attention to patients’ needs. Whether a bath or a last milkshake, the gestures and acts of compassion would allow people to die with peace and dignity, she said.

“When she would come to a person’s bedside, her love would make her blend in to be one of the family,” Dodson said. “Even if she met (the patient) hours before death, her charisma, soul and love would allow (the patient) to be complete.”

Rink herself had been mentored by [Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross](#), the author of *On Death and Dying*, a pioneering work in which she outlined the now famous Five Stages of Grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance — that make up a pattern of adjustment to impending fate. According to Kübler-Ross, individuals facing death experience most of the stages, as do many of their survivors.

Rink’s experience with death gave her an uncanny spiritual understanding, which allowed her to empathize with her patients, Marston said.

“Gail knew when the spirit left the body, and I didn’t realize that you could know that or she had that intuition,” Marston said. “She had access to a whole other world of knowing, a spirit level of knowing that she was privileged to know. She walked in the room and everyone knew it was all OK.”

Whether Rink knew someone for minutes or years, she would always make them feel appreciated, said Dr. Fred Kass, Rink’s mentee, friend and medical peer. Kass likened

Rink to a human [Facebook](#) because she knew and remembered intimate details about so many people.

“When you saw her, for those five minutes you were her best friend, that was because she was sincerely interested in everybody,” said Kass, director of research and wellness at the [Cancer Center of Santa Barbara](#). “That was the heart of who she was, that’s why everybody loved her.”

Rink’s impact extended beyond family and friends of the hundreds of people she treated as they neared death. Her ability to harvest deep connections with patients gave doctors the courage and skill to perform at a higher standard, Kass said.

“She taught me to better understand where patients were coming from and appreciate things from their perspective — not only to say what I needed to say as a doctor, but hear what I had to say as they heard,” Kass said. “If we could really empathize with them we could be better at helping them.”

Rink was born in Niagara Falls, N.Y., graduated from [Boston University](#) with a bachelor’s degree in art in 1970 and earned her master’s in social work two years later. She started at Hospice of Santa Barbara in 1981 as a social worker and moved her way up. Rink served as the director of psycho-social services for 10 years as well as the director of community counseling and education for two. She took on the executive director role in 2001 and retired in 2008, not long after hospice moved in to spacious new quarters on the Riviera, at 2050 Alameda Padre Serra, Suite 100. In her retirement, Rink remained involved with hospice but also pursued her passion for bridge, playing regularly with a group of close friends.

Among many accolades, Rink spurred the collaboration between hospice and [Visiting Nurse & Hospice Care](#). She earned an award for outstanding care of people with AIDS in Santa Barbara, and in 2002 she was named the “First Lady of the [Dream Foundation](#)” and the “Health Care Hero Organization of the Year” in 2004. She also led countless workshops and training on grief counseling and patient care.

Despite a life filled with accomplishment, Marston believed Rink only had one regret: The more busy she got, the less she would know each of the 100-plus volunteers on the deepest level.

“There is no one like Gail,” Kass said. “There are really good people who are very promising that remind me of her, but there was only one Gail. (Hopefully) there is some piece of who we are a little like her.”

Rink is survived by one daughter, Dr. Elizabeth Rink of Bozeman.

Yawitz said she is especially grateful for the relationship she has cultivated with Beth Rink.

“I want people to know how generous she was in sharing her friends and daughter with me,” Yawitz said. ”They were very much a part of my life and as long as I am here, I will always be there for them, most of all for her daughter, Beth.”

A public memorial service will be held in Santa Barbara. The date, time and location will be announced shortly.

[Click here to offer a memorial comment](#) at the Hospice of Santa Barbara website.

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