

From the editor: Photos cast light on a topic we'd all rather ignore

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Today's Democrat-Herald features a powerful story by Jennifer Moody, accompanied by extraordinary photos by David Patton, about a program at Samaritan Evergreen Hospice House in which therapy dogs offer a measure of comfort to dying patients.

The photograph on our front page shows Phoebe, a 7-month-old Cardigan Welsh corgi snuggling with 96-year-old hospice patient Lillian Downs of Albany. It's not the sort of photograph that you see often in the pages of the Democrat-Herald — or, for that matter, in newspapers anywhere — and we understand it's likely to trigger a variety of reactions from readers.

There are some things you should know about the photo and the story.

First, of course, is the fact that Moody and Patton were in the room with the permission of Downs' family. We hope it goes without saying that we never would publish a photo like this — a photo that captures such an intimate, tender moment — without express permission. And we double-checked with her family as we made plans to run the story in Wednesday's paper.

Second: This is a story about a program in which trained therapy dogs make the rounds at a hospice facility. The photos tell exactly that story, and with an emotional punch that mere words by themselves cannot convey. (In fact, I think that the still-photo nature of photojournalism often captures more emotion than even video. As a writer and editor, I still am somewhat resentful of the power photojournalists possess to capture that emotional lightning in just one image.)

Finally, we didn't make the decision to run these photos without considerable thought and discussion among Democrat-Herald writers, editors and photographers. We understand that some readers might be distressed by the image, but we thought that the photos were appropriate and powerful ways to tell this story visually.

One other factor was at play: As a society, we still have a hard time talking about and coping with end-of-life issues. And this is a story, in some ways, about people who are dying. There's no way around that. Lillian Downs was alive when these photos were taken. She died a few hours afterward.

Just ask anybody who works in a hospice facility about our overall reluctance to ponder these end-of-life issues. We'd prefer to look the other way rather than spend any time thinking about the end of the road, even though it's out there for each one of us. Our lackadaisical performance in filling out advance directive forms or living wills offers ample evidence of that.

We all deserve a chance to die with dignity, surrounded by people intent on easing the path

of this final journey off this mortal coil. In a small but important way, these three therapy dogs help to do that. But each of us can take steps — today, this month, this year — to help ease our final journeys when that time eventually comes. (mm)