

Spirit of prison hospice: One man's legacy



BERTRUM "HERKY" BURKETT
04/18/1957 - 01/24/2024

*THE WORDS OF PRISON HOSPICE VOLUNTEER Bertrum 'Herky' Burkett, who died in January 2024, have been highlighted in several postings on the End-of-Life Care Behind Bars website (see sidebar next page). Herky is heard and seen in the 2013 documentary 'Prison Terminal: The Last Days of Private Jack Hall.' His perspective continues to fuel the growing interest in the concept of prison hospice. Below is a Facebook posting by the director of 'Prison Terminal...', Edgar Barends, a commentary on the legacy of a "saved soul." **Barry R. Ashpole***

IT IS WITH A HEAVY HEART that I convey the somber news of the passing of my dear friend, Bertrum Burkett, affectionately known as Herky to many. Last night, he left this world from the comfort of his hospice room at the Iowa State Penitentiary, under the care of his Sail to Serenity peers trained in end-of-life care.

For those acquainted with my film, "Prison Terminal...", Herky served as the natural leader of the hospice volunteers at the Iowa State Penitentiary. His unwavering commitment to the hospice program, coupled with his exceptional powers of observation, boundless compassion, and profound empathy, positioned him as the quintessential individual for the role of an end-of-life caregiver. His dedication was unparalleled, and those privileged to work alongside him can attest to this wholeheartedly.

Herky's radiant smile, no-nonsense approach, and unwavering empathy established him as the steadfast cornerstone of leadership among the initial group of inmates who embraced the formidable challenge of becoming hospice workers within a system resistant to change in caring for the ailing prisoner. He guided the terminally ill, many of whom were not just patients but cherished friends and family, to their final resting place.

Screening "Prison Terminal" since its completion and spreading its message of creating a prison hospice program, I can confidently say that without Herky and his heartfelt account of his transformation from "a convict to a hospice volunteer," my film would not have had the profound impact it did on the hearts and minds of the thousands who witnessed Herky's work firsthand.

Herky's presence in my documentary played a pivotal role, not only in the numerous nominations and awards but, more importantly, in catalyzing the adoption and establishment of prison hospices nationwide. As an incarcerated individual, Herky stood as living proof that change can penetrate a carceral system often deficient in empathy and compassion for the human lives it confines within its walls.

While much work remains to be done in promoting palliative care within our prison system, Herky, along with his dedicated peers, serves as a much-needed guiding light to make this vision a reality throughout the land. Over more than a decade, Herky and I have corresponded continuously, becoming trusted brothers, openly sharing our setbacks, losses, altercations, frustrations, and triumphs.

When I received the news of "Prison Terminal" being nominated for an Oscar in 2014, Herky was among the first to whom I confided this incredible milestone. In response, he expressed unwavering confidence, believing that my work, and more significantly, the work of those in the hospice program, would receive the recognition it deserved.

I find myself devoted to the prison hospice movement, collaborating with an exceptional team at the Humane Prison Hospice Project. They wholeheartedly embrace the hospice approach originally employed at the Iowa State Penitentiary, as well as the invaluable contributions of the incarcerated men now serving as hospice volunteers, bringing that model to life.

At present, I lack comprehensive details regarding Herky's passing and anticipate receiving updated information in the days to come. I can rest assured, as can Herky's immediate family members, that their brother, uncle, son, and father received the care and dignity he once offered generously to his terminally ill patients while he was an integral part of Sail to Serenity.

I am gratified to know that the man who devoted his life to extending compassion, love, and empathy to those in their final moments met his end with the similar comfort of human companionship he deserved. Rest in peace, my brother. I love you. **Edgar Barends, 'Prison Terminal...'**

I'm somebody no one thought I could be

And we always wondered who was gonna be the last one living to take care of the rest of 'em. Well, when they brought in a hospice, it gave us an avenue to take care of each other. In order to get in here, they're pretty sick. They're dyin'. So you're dealin' with them knowin' that it doesn't matter what you do. You're not helpin' them to live. All you're doin' is makin' their passing easier. We hold their hands. We pray. And we bathe 'em. We feed 'em, make sure they eat. We take 'em to the yard. We take care of all the things that they need. And when that patient has a family, his family is allowed to come back in here to the hospice.

When I started hospice, I thought it would be about what I can give to the patient, what I could do for that patient to make 'em feel better. But when you do what you do, the feeling that you get back from them, you can't even describe it.