

A letter to the PATH physician:

I met you a few months ago, on a day that felt like most other days since my dad, Ray Billo, became sick with blisters on his feet. On this seemingly normal day, I went to work, did interviews and at the end of the day my phone rang—it was my mom. She asked if I could come and get her because "the doctor" would like to discuss next steps. I will never forget the drive and walk down the long hallway, which felt like it would never stop winding. When we got to the floor, you were already standing at the side of the nurse's station. Little did I know that this moment would shape the rest of my experience and create an everlasting place in my heart for you.

You and a student walked us into the family room; you gave us a prognosis that shook the ground we stood on. Your voice was calm and gentle, but direct and appropriate. It was in this moment, I felt angry. I wanted to find a reason not to like you because you were telling me the information I wasn't and would never be ready to hear. A few hours later, I realized I wasn't angry with you, nor were you the enemy; quite the opposite. I just didn't know it yet, you were the angel that entered my family's life.

From that point forward, you provided my family and most importantly my hero with unwavering support. There was no limit to your support. You went to Mexico for the holidays and called my mother every day to check in. You never sent her calls to voicemail or put her broken heart to the wayside. When you returned you went and saw my dad; you were there every single step of the way; you delivered hard news in a soft manner; and I know he always appreciated that you heard him, you never tried to sway him in a direction he didn't want. I remember the moment you said "Ray if you are done fighting, we will respect that, but if you want more time we will be there for you then too."

My dad wanted to be at home. We didn't have a time frame of how long he would be with us; all we knew is that there was no more treatment available to him. My dad stayed in the hospital until some of the fluid reduced, which gave him more time with us. This was a true gift.

My dad came home on December 28, 2016. My mom, sister and I were terrified that he would fall or we would not be able to manage his care. It was you, who assisted my family, providing strength and confidence to keep him home and comfortable.

We had a family meeting scheduled with the family physician, for Wednesday, but on Tuesday we knew there was just no way we would be able to get there—my dad was just too frail and weak. We texted you and asked if you could do a home visit. The next day you came after work and met with the entire family in our living room. Dad pulled strength out of thin air and walked on his own, just to show you he was all right.

Something we cherish about Ray, our loving father and husband—he was tough, he was a fighter, he never throws in the towel, not even when it was time. On Thursday morning dad fell out of his favorite chair, we picked him up and made him comfortable again. He asked for a drink and when I held it in his hands, he couldn't link his hands to his mouth and I had to hold it for him. It was at this moment that I knew we were nearing the end.

On Friday we got scared so we called 911 because my dad couldn't stay awake, he couldn't walk, and he was confused. It was you that spoke to me and told me that our family was strong enough to do this, to grant my dad's final wish to stay at home. I have always considered myself a strong willed individual with the ability to respect people's wishes even when they hurt more than words, but this process has tested my strength and my ability to accept another's wishes when it is someone you love. Every time I questioned my strength, you were always there to remind me of what was important; my dad's well-being and comfort.

My dad passed away on February 13, 2017, at 2:22 am after a 3-day fight. For 3 days we administered hydromorphone for pain and Ativan for agitation through a subcutaneous line that was put in by the VON. We held his hand while he lay on his favorite couch in the comfort of his own home, with pillows and blankets. You were right, this wasn't scary, it was peaceful and beautiful, it gave us uninterrupted time with our father/husband and allowed us more time to say, "see you again".

The last days, hours and minutes I spent with my dad were beautiful memories that I will not forget. Every time I stood up, I would give him a kiss on his forehead. Every time I woke through the night in the chair beside him, I would check his breathing and tell him I loved him again. I made sure he wasn't too warm, or too cold. My family ate pizza and watched movies while my father lay peaceful beside us. This time was precious and healing. I lay behind my dad's legs and fell asleep rubbing his hand, telling him all the stories I remembered. I would tell him it was ok for him to go whenever he was ready. About an hour later my mom and a close family friend woke me and said these would be his final moments. I got up, put my head and hand on his chest, and in this moment he took his last breath, we said farewell until we can meet again.

I wanted to give my insight into the last few months and how they have impacted my family and tell you that your support has positively impacted the rest of our lives.

You, as well as others, have created a beautiful and dignified team that deserves more resources than you currently have at your disposal. You are a beautiful person with a heart made of pure love and empathy. You need more people on your team; more families should experience the gift you offered our family—dignified end of life care.

How can I assist in helping secure funding or resources? My family and close friends want to find a way to help this program, not only do we believe in you.....we believe in what your team does.

Thank you for being loving, caring, compassionate, empathetic and consistent, while you worked with my family. I want you to know you will be remembered and if there is anything you need, reach out to us because we are here for you too.

Love, health, and happiness to you,

Written by: Kate Billo, daughter of Raymond Billo

