

Paulette Davidson



The silent voice praying by the bedside

Paulette Davidson's first job as a healthcare chaplain was at the top trauma hospital in Washington D.C. When patients were brought in from car accidents or with gunshot wounds or third-degree burns, she was there. "I was that silent voice praying by the bedside while doctors are working to save their lives," she says.

And when family members burst in — screaming, in shock, terrified — she was there to scream with them or hold their hands or calm them down so they could listen to the doctors.

In 2019, she accepted the job at Capital Caring, the largest non-profit provider of elder health, advanced illness, hospice, and at-home care services for the Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C. area. She says she wanted to view death and grief from a different perspective — beyond that time of intense stress and loss. She wanted to help families the next day and the day after that as they came to terms with death.

"I have seen it from the hospital," she says. "I wanted to see it from the home."

A preachers' kid

Paulette grew up a "preachers' kid" in Pittsburgh, the youngest of four children. Both her parents are pastors and her father has been working as a chaplain for the last 25 years at a VA hospital.

She studied business in college initially, then switched her major to social work. While in school she decided to enlist in the Army. At the time she says, "I couldn't do a push up to save my life." But she says the experience was transformative and taught her purpose and discipline. When she went back to finish her degree, she decided to join ROTC to become a leader in the Army. She decided to pursue military chaplaincy as a way help people.

She became pregnant in her last year of college. She chose an internship in a high school working with teen moms and dads. "I was 23 years old, becoming a new mom, and these were 16-year olds with young children. I was teaching them about education, and they were teaching me about parenting," she says.

She has carried that teaching and learning philosophy with her into her career. In support groups, she leads by helping people learn from each other and find strength from within, she says.

From military to healthcare chaplain

When she graduated from college, she commissioned as an officer in 2010 and worked in the reserves while she enrolled at Howard University School of Divinity to pursue her Master's degree.

Her daughter was only 2 yrs old, and she was a single mom, living in a new city far from home. She worked hard and found success. After three years, she graduated and was ordained as an Elder in the Pentecostal church, though she emphasizes that chaplains do not discriminate, regardless if you are "Methodist or Buddhist or Wicken or Spiritual or not."

Rather than going active duty with the military, as she had planned, she retired from the Army in October 2015 and applied for a clinical pastoral education residency with Medstar Washington Hospital Center so she could work in healthcare settings. "I fell in love with the work," she says.

Now, as a hospice and palliative care chaplain, her job is to address the emotional, psychological and spiritual needs of patients and families. She typically would visit a roster of patients in different assisted living communities, but the novel coronavirus pandemic has changed the daily rhythm of her job and the needs she is trying to meet.

Spiritual care amid Covid-19

Now she spends most of her time on the phone – often with family members who are worried about loved ones they can no longer see. She encourages new ways to connect with their loved ones, whether through technology or care packages or regular visits to the window to say hello.

And she helps them identify meaningful ways to honor their loved one when they die, as most in-person memorial services have been put on hold. "If they liked to wear purple, wear purple. Choose a date on the calendar to remember them and light a purple candle. Their spirit/legacy is going to live on in you if you have a funeral or not," she says.

She also runs a monthly bereavement support group. In her work, she says, she tries to meet people where they are. From a spiritual standpoint, she asks herself, "what is God trying to say to me and to this person in this moment," she says.

She also helps people identify the things they are grateful about at difficult time – Grateful for zoom calls. Grateful for work. Grateful that their loved one is free from physical pain and the fear of an ongoing pandemic.

"Even when we are discouraged, the sun still shines. The moon still rises. The world is still evolving," she says.