

LOCAL

Woman who won lawsuit wants to help others

BY ANDIE L. BRYMER
Staff Writer

Kathy Gray watched as her husband Dick, a middle aged man, took on the appearance of someone decades older.

"He looked like a fragile old man," the Kings Mountain woman said.

In addition to the tired and aged look, Dick's abdomen ballooned. Kathy Gray says she and Dick tried to get his physician to take the changes seriously. Instead, the doctor credited it all to a hernia and existing diabetes, Gray said.

Dick would need surgery to repair the hernia. No one realized as the operation was scheduled that his liver was failing.

Dick Gray died nine days after the operation on Jan. 18, 2000 at age 55.

The chemicals in the anesthesia were all it took to shut down Gray's already compromised liver. After surgery he briefly woke up agitated. Kathy Gray calmed her husband as doctors told her the situation was normal. The next day she knew nothing was normal.

Dick Gray was moved from a Gaston hospital to Carolinas Medical Center. Doctors there told Kathy Gray one of three scenarios would play out. Her husband's liver would heal on its own, he would receive a transplant or he would die. They asked if Dick had hepatitis. Was he a drinker? She told them neither was the case.

After being placed at the top of a liver transplant list, Dick Gray died. He never regained consciousness, never got to tell his family good-bye.

Kathy Gray holds the internist and clinic responsible. After six and a half days of testimony a Cleveland

County jury agreed with her. Gray was awarded \$865,000 April 14 for what the court calls an "improper standard of care" and negligence.

Gray's allergies kept her from hearing as the verdict was read. She looked around to see her attorney Eddie Knox place his head on the table. Paralegal Kathi Zemza was crying. Noting her clients confused looked, Zemza turned to Gray and said, "we won."

Gray says she was surprised to find out money was part of the verdict. She was after truth.

While the judgement initially may sound like a large sum, attorney fees will take out a chunk. The remainder Gray will use to take care of herself financially.

"It's giving back what Dick would have provided," she said.

But the money will not return Dick to his wife, daughters and grandsons.

The money "can never hold my hand as I walk through the rest of my life, hold me in the night, sit beside me in church or watch our grandchildren grow up," Gray wrote recently.

She has put pen to paper a lot lately. After television stations and newspapers publicized the verdict, Kathy received phone calls, many from widows like herself who felt they too were suffering from physicians' mistakes.

As she gave callers advice, Gray began to suspect God was leading her. She quickly realized her family was only one among many who were hurt by medical malpractice.

She wrote a summary of her experiences and included instructions for people seeking medical care for serious conditions and those contemplating legal action.

A strategy of self-advoca-

cy underlies her words.

"Don't be afraid. You have the right to know everything - ask," she wrote.

Request physicians read, show and explain all test results.

"They're going to show me exactly what the ranges are. I will decide if I'm alright or not," Gray said.

It is acceptable to ask for more than 15 minutes with the physician. Hurried, unsympathetic doctors should be replaced, Gray advises.

"You're paying for their services," Gray reminds patients and their families.

The role Gray's religious faith has played in her experience is obvious.

"Ask God, then step out in faith," is first on her list.

Gray believes physicians' knowledge comes from God, however, how that talent is used is a human choice, she writes.

Patients have a responsibility as well. Communicating with doctors helps insure better care, according to Gray.

She also believes patients have a right to pursue legal action, however the decision to sue her husband's physician was not easy, Gray says. The statute of limitations is two years, meaning a suit must be initiated within that time frame, she has told callers.

The two years are often necessary. "You're so devastated. It's hard to think," Gray said.

She talked with her pastor, Mike Chambers of Christian Freedom Baptist Church about whether to take legal action.

"I had to pray a lot. I wanted to hate him (the doctor)," Gray said. "If you're going to say you're a Christian, you have to live the life of a Christian."

Gray says she feels bad



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Dick Gray's family stands together following his January 2000 memorial service at Christian Freedom Church. Pictured from left are Ricky Gray, Cody Francis, Kathy Gray, Christy Gray, Buffy Gray and Tiffany Francis. A photo of Dick Gray is in the left corner.

for the doctor, but hopes the suit was a learning experience for him.

She and Dick had planned after his retirement to move to Colorado to spend more time with grandson Cody. Despite daughters Buffy Gray and Tiffany Francis living in the west and daughter Christy Gray in Gaston County, the family remained close.

After Dick's death, Buffy Gray, Tiffany Francis and her son moved permanently to North Carolina. The three live with Kathy Gray. Christy Gray visits on weekends.

Initially grief-induced insomnia meant the women would find one another at the computer, in front of the

television or in the kitchen during the wee hours of the morning.

Cody's grief found its way out through high fevers, dehydration, weight loss and respiratory problems. Losing his grandfather at age seven caused him to fear losing the rest of the family. Going outside without his mom, grandmother or an aunt was impossible for the once adventuresome boy.

"God, am I really in this world? Is this really happening to me?" Kathy Gray would pray, summing up her family's feelings.

This was not Kathy Gray's first loss. Her son Rick died in 1990. Only this time, Dick was not there to share her

grief.

In the wake of her husband's death, Kathy avoided reading verses in Ecclesiastes which say God gives us a time to mourn.

"I'm going to mourn the rest of my life," the newly widowed woman thought.

She resented the notion that one day she would heal. But that time is gradually coming, Gray says now, though she believes there will always be an ache in her heart.

Gray and her daughters are now working on a book.

"Sometimes I can hardly wait to see what you have for me tomorrow. It's going to be interesting," Gray sometimes prays.

Grover resident wants council's help with water drainage problem

BY ANDIE L. BRYMER
Staff Writer

GROVER - Town council heard a request from property owner Kaye Hedtke to help with water drainage from city lines onto her Linden Street property.

Hedtke is asking the city to consider paying for a portion of work to correct the problem. The storm drain opens into tile and dirt just past her home.

"The problem is there is more than one place in town in this condition. The others only want to complain, not help fix it," Mayor Robert Sides said during Monday night's meeting.

Town attorney Mickey Corry cautioned that it can be difficult to decide which residents will get help with repairs.

Town Commissioner Bill Willis argued that the town's culvert is "in some respects forcing the water there."

Commissioner Max Rollins countered that the water would run downhill and into Hedtke's yard regardless.

Willis responded that the town's drains cause the water to enter Hedtke's yard in a concentrated flow. He also said that to completely correct the problem the water needs to be routed to the ditch, otherwise it will end up in a neighbor's yard.

Rollins questioned whether work on private property is the town's responsibility.

Willis questioned if Hedtke were to close off the drain with concrete could the city intervene since it is private property.

Sides will gather more information.

In other business, commissioners voted to contribute \$150 to the Grover Woman's Club for expenses incurred at the town's Mayfest. Rollins cast the lone dissenting vote. He said he was not against the reimbursement in prin-

ciple but in the manner it was handled.

Rollins cast another lone no vote on accepting a bid of \$17,987 from Asphalt Paving of Shelby to pave a portion of Lakeview Drive and Linden Street and to construct and pave a cul-de-sac at the end of Linden Street.

Rollins said he voted in the negative because of unresolved problems with past work done by the company.

The council discussed the Woman's Club leasing the park concession stand and coordinating gate opening and closing and restroom cleaning. The group will present a formal proposal during next month's meeting.

Sides reported that the waste treatment plant had to be pumped two or three times this month due to grease in the lines. He called it an "enormous problem."

The council will hold a budget work session May 12 at 6 p.m.

'Mama Said' at Broad River

Mama Said Ensemble will be in concert Sunday, May 16 from 2-4 p.m. at the Phifer Cabin at Broad River Greenway. Call 434-2357 for more information.

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