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## *In the Company of Angels*

By Sara Gilbert Frederick  
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KASOTA — There are 98 glass angels hanging in a display case in Nancy and Roland Schwichtenberg's kitchen, a reminder of all the people who have died in the house — except one.

The 99th angel refuses to stay tacked to the wooden case. Although it is no bigger or heavier than the rest of the figurines anchored to the wood with thumbtacks, it always ends up resting on the shelf below it, instead of flying from the shelf above. Roland Schwichtenberg can't say how many times he's put the angel back up, but he doesn't bother anymore.

"Now it's even turned around, facing the wall," said Nancy Schwichtenberg, who has been running a hospice, Nancy's Comfort Kare, in her home for the past 16 years. "That's just like this guy; he was such a practical joker."

Such spirits have long found comfort in the Schwichtenberg's rural Kasota home. Although they don't know just why, they firmly believe that angels knock on their door, visit patients in their rooms, turn the TV on and off and even usher people home at death.

"They're open to it," Reverend Barbara Jackman, a former hospice chaplain who often visits Nancy's Comfort Kare, offers as an explanation. "They aren't afraid of it."

"Some people think we're crazy out here," Nancy added. "But I think God has allowed us to see these things so that we can pass them on."

That's exactly what she's doing. She and Jackman have spent much of the last year working to complete "The Angels I Hold in My Arms," a collection of stories about the incredible experiences she's shared with her patients in their final days and hours. It will be released by Minnesota Heritage Publishing later this month.

The book had been on Schwichtenberg's mind for years. She had even started the process of collecting stories with a writer at one point, but that fell through. Then she was diagnosed with cancer herself a year ago and suddenly, there was a new urgency to get the book done.

That's where Jackman came in. During a visit to see Nancy after the cancer diagnosis, Jackman asked her about what hopes she had and what dreams she wanted to see come true. "Nancy mentioned the book," Jackman remembered. "I went home and thought about it. I do write — but I write sermons and articles for hospice journals and such. I wasn't sure if I could do it."

With Schwichtenberg's helps, she's done it. The two have worked to gather "vignettes and visions" to include in the book, often talking in the midst of excruciating pain on Nancy's part. They talked about the pair of angels with long dresses and golden hair sweeping into a room to lift a woman up to heaven; they discussed angels walking the halls of the house, seeming to inspect it before a loved one was admitted. They talked about mysterious knocks, taps and other noises that the Schwichtenberg's can only chalk up to heavenly guests.

But in January, with dozens of stories still to be told, Schwichtenberg took a turn for the worse and made a final request of Jackman: When the book is finished, make sure you give a copy to Roland and the kids.

"I went home and thought, 'I've got to finish this thing,'" Jackman said. "So I made contact with Julie Schrader at Minnesota Heritage Publishing on a Monday, met with her on Tuesday, and by the end of February, we were going to press. It was definitely a God thing."

Schrader felt the same urgency to get the book printed and released — and was honored to help it along. “When I first met with Barb Jackman, I was impressed by what she was doing for Nancy and felt very strongly that I’d like to help,” she said. “This book project touched something inside me since my mother passed away from cancer. I explained the situation to the editor and the printer and both did all they could to see that this was done in a timely manner. So yes, it came together quickly, but it seemed easy because everyone involved wanted to help.”

By early April, Nancy had rallied back from her January low. But despite her improved health, she couldn’t help but think that all the pieces for publishing the book had fallen into place so quickly for a reason: so that she could see it completed before dying.

“This is the best that I’ve felt in a long time,” she said. “I haven’t been in the hospital now for a while. But if this is the end, that’s fine with me. Now that the book is done, I’m not really hanging on for anything else.”

Roland, her husband of 35 years, is, however. “I was kind of hoping that you’d want to work on a sequel,” he said.

If You Go...

What: “The Angels I Hold in My Arms” release and signing

Where: Tacy’s House, 332 Center Street, Mankato

When: April 28, 1 p.m.-3 p.m.

For more information, visit [www.mnheritage.com](http://www.mnheritage.com)