



Contact: Petra Langer
781-640-0086
planger@partners.org

Schwartz Center Announces Compassionate Caregiver Award Winner
Vilma Barrios is first certified nursing assistant and first hospice caregiver to be honored

Boston, MA (November 18, 2011) – The Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening the relationship between patients and caregivers, has announced that Vilma Barrios, a Brighton resident and certified nursing assistant at Circle of Caring at Hospice of the Good Shepherd in Newton, Massachusetts, has been selected to receive its prestigious 2011 Schwartz Center Compassionate Caregiver Award®. Barrios is the first nursing assistant and first hospice caregiver to receive this honor.

“We are thrilled to be able to recognize someone like Vilma, who represents one of the many unsung heroes in our healthcare system,” said Julie Rosen, executive director of The Schwartz Center. “With so much focus these days on what’s wrong with healthcare, it’s a pleasure to honor a caregiver who is doing everything right and making a huge difference in the lives of terminally ill patients and their families.”

Barrios is a native of Guatemala who came to the U.S. when she was 16 to join her family. Within a short period of time, she married, became a citizen, and started a family. She worked in manufacturing for 10 years, but says she never found meaning in her work. When her company announced it would be moving much of its operations out of state, she volunteered to be laid off so she could find more fulfilling work. An employment counselor suggested she become a certified nursing assistant, and according to Barrios, “I jumped at the chance.”

“I began to notice older people in grocery stores and shopping malls,” she says. “Helping them gave me great joy. The problems of the elderly soon hit close to home when my mom had a stroke. Caring for her made me realize my true calling.”

In support of her nomination, The Schwartz Center received letters from many of her patients and their families, including this comment from one: “Month after month, Vilma’s self-assurance and competence unfold before us, as does her good humor and nurturing nature. Where does medicine come into this picture? There seems to be no better companion to competent medical practice than skillfully performed, tender loving care – and we thank our lucky stars for Vilma’s having entered our lives at this crucial moment.”

Barrios says that people in need of hospice require a special kind of care. “The patients and their families are suffering, knowing that a lifetime of experiences and relationships will soon end” she explains. “I try to give them comfort and support. For some, our time together may last only

a few days, for others it may stretch into months. No matter how long we are able to be together, I try to make our time as pleasant, pain-free, and happy as possible.”

According to Hospice of Good Shepherd social worker Peggy Brown, “She is able to talk to our patients and their families about end of life issues in a personal and meaningful way that respects the values of our diverse patient population and the choices people have made about their care.”

In addition to her work with terminally ill patients, Barrios also cares for younger individuals with disabling chronic illnesses. As a result of this experience, she now volunteers on the weekends for a nonprofit theatre group that integrates artists with and without disabilities in the arts. She describes herself as someone who loves to sing, dance, and write. She has written poems for her patients and often sings to comfort them.

Barrios was honored at the 16th Annual Kenneth B. Schwartz Compassionate Healthcare Dinner on November 17th at the Boston Convention Center. The dinner is one of the largest healthcare events in New England, attracting more than 2,000 healthcare CEOs, practicing clinicians, and medical and nursing students. Barrios attended the dinner with her husband and three daughters and spoke, letting the audience know that she plans to return to school to become a nurse.

Barrios was selected by a review committee based on how well she embodies the characteristics of compassionate care, including providing effective communication and emotional support, furthering mutual trust and respect, involving patients and families in healthcare decisions, and treating patients as people, not just illnesses.

The Schwartz Center Compassionate Caregiver Award is made possible in part by the generosity of AstraZeneca. The award has been given annually since 1999.

The Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare (www.theschwartzcenter.org) was founded in 1995 by Ken Schwartz, a Boston healthcare attorney who died of lung cancer at the age of 40 and found that what mattered to him most as a patient was the compassionate care he received from his caregivers, which he said “made the unbearable bearable.” He established the Schwartz Center days before his death to ensure that all patients receive compassionate care.

The Center’s signature program is Schwartz Center Rounds®, which has been adopted by hundreds of hospitals and other healthcare institutions across the country. The program provides a safe place where caregivers from multiple disciplines can come together on a regular basis to discuss the challenging emotional and social issues that arise in caring for patients. It has been found to enhance compassionate care, improve teamwork, and reduce caregiver stress and isolation. The Schwartz Center also develops and funds other innovative programs, recognizes and honors outstanding caregivers, and supports policies that promote and advance compassionate care.

###