

## 'A Blast of Cold Air is Like a Hug'

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Every day, before Robert Hoy leaves his Malden apartment for the spot where he feels most at home, before he starts off on foot for a place where few can walk, before he goes to live amongst the dying, he slips into the coat his dead son gave him.

The white Maine Guide Jacket, an L.L. Bean bestseller, seals him from the chill as he makes the hour-long trek from Malden to Dorchester on the MBTA each morning. He switches lines to get off in Copley Square, where he checks out a different documentary video each week from the Boston Public Library – he has already exhausted the Malden library's selections – finally stepping off the train at Ashmont, just blocks from The Boston Home.

His lanky, down-sheathed figure is a familiar sight in this end of Boston, where Hoy, who is 74, joins a handful of other, mostly-teenage volunteers at The Boston Home each morning.

Like other volunteers, he helps the home's residents – all of whom suffer neurological diseases, such as multiple sclerosis – to eat, read, get out of bed, and learn through the documentary videos he brings once a week. But Mr. Hoy, as those residents who can still speak prefer to call him, differs from most other volunteers at The Boston Home.

This, six months ago, is where his son died.

### 'The best son you could ever have'

In Robert Hoy's life, disease is like a rope – sometimes, it knots up and holds him in place; other times, it doubles back and strangles him when he isn't looking.



Robert Hoy holds his son Tim's 1977 High School graduation picture. A successful engineer he was diagnosed with MS at age 32.  
(Nicole Goodhue Boyd)

Hoy has survived, though others have not. First his wife fell ill, and he tied himself around her like a life vest, hanging on until it was no longer in his power to keep her. His eldest son Paul lives inside a mind shackled by bipolar disorder, and Hoy has kept tabs on him with a loving, yet invisible fatherly leash.

Then came the suffocating news: Hoy's happily-married son Tim, an accomplished field engineer, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis age 32 – and it seemed hope itself was unraveling.

"The day he told me it was that, I just cried," said Hoy, who lives alone in Malden and can still recall the way his son gradually lost coordination in the months leading up to his diagnosis. It was Tim's mother-in-law

who finally noticed that he walked sideways when he meant to go straight, and pushed him to see a doctor.

Hoy remembered his son Timothy while he made the rounds inside The Boston Home recently, swallowing down a tear and twisting his arms across his chest as the words lodged in his throat.

"I really loved that guy," he said. "He was about the best son you ever could have."

After what he called the "devastating diagnosis," Hoy watched the disease rob Tim of all the things he most cherished: agility, independence, his marriage, his breath, and finally his life.



Bob Hoy places his hand on Ruth Ellen Centola's chair during a program on "creatures of the deep" at The Boston Home in Dorchester. Hoy, who lives in Malden, gives lectures and pictorial presentations to the home's residents, who suffer from neurological diseases such as multiple sclerosis. Hoy's son Tim was a patient here until his death in August, yet Hoy continues to volunteer at the home daily.  
(Nicole Goodhue Boyd/Staff)

After losing his job, but before losing all mobility, Tim lobbied many North Shore businesses for better accessibility, and boycotted several – including Dunkin’ Donuts and the local post office, even though his father is a retired U.S. Postal Service worker.



Robert Hoy, of Malden, a retired postal worker, laughs with Sister Bridget Haas of the Boston Home in Dorchester, where he volunteers daily with residents suffering the effects of MS. Mr. Hoy, as residents refer to him, has visited the home daily since his late son Timothy Hoy moved there after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.  
(Nicole Goodhue Boyd/Staff)

“I’m very proud of Tim. He never gave me an ounce of trouble,” said Hoy, laughing as he remembered Tim’s insistence that he join the protests. “The coat I’m wearing today, he gave me 20 years ago. Sometimes, I look around, and I see him.”

Before an inability to care for himself forced Tim into The Boston Home, he also broadcast his own cable television program advocating disability awareness in Beverly, where he lived when he was diagnosed with MS.

“When he got his MS, he couldn’t do his work anymore, but he wanted to do something else,” said Hoy. “He decided to go on public TV and produce a show. He interviewed people who were handicapped, and he did that for quite a while.”

He taped his last show in 1999, after his wife divorced him, and when he was “fading,” as his father put it.

“There was a time when he couldn’t speak anymore, so he’d just blink his eyes,” said Hoy, who kept vigil by Tim at his Boston Home hospice bed, and in nearby Carney Hospital on Dorchester Avenue when necessary. “The morning he died, I had stayed the night. I would put my arms around him to let him know I was still there.”

Tim died last August at The Boston Home. The morning Tim died, his father was still on the train, scrambling back from retrieving some critical heart medication at home in Malden. That day, and the next day, he wept, overcome at not having seen Tim in his last moments.

“I didn’t expect that to happen so fast,” he said. “Tim was 47 when he passed away.”

Hoy took his son home to Malden, the city where Tim grew up and went to high school, for a funeral and burial in what was supposed to be the prime of his adult life. Hoy struggled to cope with the loss alongside his other son, Paul, who took Tim’s death the hardest. Hoy found himself surrounded by pictures of his beloved child and friend, who had defined his day-to-day routine for so long and who had passed away sooner than he believed possible.

Yet five days later, he returned to the place where Tim had died – defying the expectations of Boston Home staffers who said they expected him to hole up with his grief in Malden, never to return to Dorchester.

“We thought that, because of the grief and because Mr. Hoy was one of the most dedicated parents we’d ever seen, we didn’t think he’d be back,” said Sister Bridget Haase, spirituality leader at the home. “Then, all of a sudden he arrived. Walking up the driveway was our Mr. Hoy.”

His grieving has not stopped, Hoy said – he’s not sure it ever will – but coming to the home his son loved so in his final years comforts him.

“I do it because my son would want me to. And I enjoy the people, I really do,” he said. “I was looking at Tim’s picture, and I knew he’d want me to go back there. I didn’t think anyone would notice. I just wanted to be where Tim was.”



Hoy never leaves home – or work – without his favorite winter jacket, a Maine Guide Coat given to him by his late son Timothy. Hoy finishes his day at The Boston Home around 4 p.m. every afternoon, and faces nearly an hour-long commute on foot and by subway back to Malden.  
(Nicole Goodhue Boyd/Staff)

## 'A blast of cold air is like a hug'

The Boston Home was founded more than 120 years ago, in 1881, when a trained nurse opened the home to care for permanently disabled people who couldn't be cared for at home, or who couldn't be accommodated in Boston-area hospitals.

Residents of The Boston Home, like many Boston-area residents, are a highly educated bunch, numbering among their ranks professors, engineers like Tim was, doctors, nurses and scholars of every stripe. The average age of the home's residents is 54, and indeed most MS diagnoses come in middle age.



Volunteer Robert Hoy of Malden talking with resident Rob Pedro as he escorts him towards a group living area where a book reading was going on Tuesday afternoon at the Boston home in Dorchester. On Mondays he gives talks to the residents about places taken from national geographic magazine. (Nicole Goodhue Boyd)

Like most Bostonians, residents of the home have aspired to career successes, building families and sharing long lives with friends.

Unlike most Bostonians, they've had their professional dreams and family goals ripped away from them by the scourge of neurological diseases like multiple sclerosis. The disease renders them confused, clumsy, unable to walk without a cane or power wheelchair, and frustrated as their body eats away at its own nerve fibers.

MS often leaves an alert mind trapped in a paralyzed body, however – and that's where "Mr. Hoy" concentrates his day's work.

Culling research from National Geographic episodes and library materials, Hoy pieces together slide shows and lectures about topics ranging from nature to his own naval experiences. He gives his talks once a week, in between helping residents feed themselves or navigate the hallways, elevators and fragrant gardens of the Boston Home.

"We talk about different countries, just to get them out of here and into another place," he said.

And residents respond to the talks, not only because the information is mind stimulating, but also because Hoy gives each person in his audience special attention, through pats, points or questions directed at listeners who can seldom respond.

Sister Bridget said she marvels his ability to remember each of the 96 residents' names, room numbers, and unique – if barely perceptible – personality traits and preferences. As one resident in a motorized wheelchair described it, "a blast of cold air is like a hug" to someone with MS – so Hoy's attention, touch and care for each person, regardless of their ability to respond, holds special meaning.

"We have volunteers," Sister Bridget said. "But we have no other Mr. Hoy."

### My peace I give you

Though the Boston Home is not affiliated with any religious group – aside from hosting Sister Bridget, who lives with an order of nuns based in Dedham, and ministers to Boston Home residents' spiritual needs – there is a common thread of faith that stretches and pulls Hoy as he journeys to and from the home each day.

He spends his weekends, the only time he doesn't frequent the home, serving Holy Eucharist at his own Catholic church, or delivering the host to hospital-bound psychiatric patients who can't come to Mass for Communion.

"I think of my God a lot," said Hoy. "The Lord says, 'I give you peace not that the world gives, but that I give.' My solace is in my God."



Hoy pushes a resident of The Boston Home in Dorchester back to his room. Hoy spends his days helping the home's residents, all of whom have debilitating neurological diseases, to get around, eat and attend daily activities. (Nicole Goodhue Boyd/Staff)

Sister Bridget said it's evident he has a "faithful heart" to come and spend his days with folks who can give nothing back, in a place that holds such personal, unhealed memories.



Volunteer Robert Hoy of Malden talking with resident Rob Pedro as he escorts him down the hall towards a group living area where a book reading was going on Tuesday afternoon at the Boston home in Dorchester.  
(Nicole Goodhue Boyd)

"It's that faithful heart he has, not only to his son but to all the residents here," she said. "He's in a constant mode of patient service. You look at him, and you say, 'how many challenges should one life have?' Yet Mr. Hoy is never down. He has this incredible courage. It's the witness he gives to what is possible in the human spirit."

For Hoy, it's the knowledge that any day, he could be among those tethered to a wheelchair or hospice bed that fills his mind when he dresses each winter day – when leaving home is harder and colder, and he knows the residents have months to wait for treasured trips outside to the home's gardens.

"I want to give them the faith to keep on going," said Hoy, leaving The Boston Home amid spindrifts of snow last week, as another twilight dwindled to evening. "I thank my God that I'm a server, and not a receiver."