

## Nicole Brodeur

# Power of the human spirit



It's one of life's great mysteries, the way people on the edge of death can hang on until something important happens.

A baby's birth. A relative's arrival. An anniversary. A wrong finally made right.

So it was on Sunday, when Samuel Snow died at Virginia Mason Medical Center in Seattle, just hours after being presented an honorable discharge from the U.S. Army.

When I heard, I sighed — then smiled. Here was a man at peace and ready to go.

Snow was wrongly court-martialed after a riot between African-American and Italian soldiers at Fort Lawton coincided with the lynching death of Pvt. Guglielmo Olivotto that same night in August 1944.

Finally, last fall, after the publication of Jack Hamann's 2005 investigative book "On American Soil," and pressure from Congressman Jim McDermott, the Army admitted its wrong and corrected history with Saturday's ceremony.

Snow, 84, wasn't there. He fell ill on Friday night and was taken to Virginia Mason. After the ceremony, Snow's son, Ray, delivered the plaque to his father's hospital room.

"I got it!" Ray Snow told his father. "Let me read it to you."

Sam Snow listened, then took the plaque, pressed it against his chest and smiled. Hours later, he died.

Alicia Keene sees it "over and over" as the director of palliative care at Virginia Mason.

"There is great power in the human spirit," Keene said, adding that it's one reason doctors are reluctant to give prognoses.

"We can do educated guesses," she said, "But the spirit will fool us every time."

She told me of one man who lingered in a coma so long that Keene asked the family if he might be waiting for one son who was serving in the military. Keene got the Red Cross to get in touch with the son, who called his father.

"We put the phone to his ear, the son talked to him and when we hung up the phone, the dad died," Keene said. "It was pretty dramatic."

One mother asked her four sons to gather in her hospital room at 7:30 one night. She met with and held each son, "And when it was done, she died," Keene said.

She believes that people can will themselves to die.

"There is some control. And there are things that happen that we don't understand."

Psychologist Robert Neimeyer, of the University of Memphis and editor of the journal *Death Studies*, doesn't see the heart telling the body what to do.

Rather, he thinks humans instinctively search for meaning in deaths like Snow's.

"I don't see it as trivializing what happened," he said, "but as us giving these events all that much more importance."

At the same time, he does believe that people "relax" their attempts to stay alive once they see their loved ones are prepared.

"It's interplay between our own needs and theirs," he said.

Ultimately, though, we don't know whether people wait to truly rest in peace.

Some things are problems that we solve. Other things, like the timing of Snow's death, are mysteries that solve us, he said.

"They put us in a place of humility and reflection."

*Nicole Brodeur's column appears Wednesday and Sunday. Reach her at 206-464-2334 or [nbrodeur@seattletimes.com](mailto:nbrodeur@seattletimes.com).*

*She is grateful to Jack and Leslie.*