If you get Rosa Farrish rolling and ask about her work as a Certified Hospice and Palliative Nursing Assistant, she’s apt to tell you “I give baths for a living” right before she starts chuckling so hard she drops her papers. This self-deprecating statement, while true, is but the frame for a much more nuanced understanding of the critical work she does as part of the hospice interdisciplinary team. Rosa is careful to address the difference between giving a patient a bath and assisting a patient with a bath.

When she speaks with her patients she will ask if she can assist. She will ask if the patient wants to wash his face or to have help with the task. She will ask if the patient wants to select her clothes for the day or if someone else should make the choice. “I’m all about choices,” she says, because at the point that Rosa comes into the patient’s life, many patients feel they have very few choices left. They may have lost their health or profession, their hobbies and leisure activities. They may have lost the choice about whether to get out of bed in the morning or not, or to go outdoors or to the movies or to a restaurant.

And at the point that a strange woman comes to the house to talk about a bath, something that the healthy among us take for granted, choice becomes very important. Dignity is something else that Rosa talks about a lot. “I’ve helped grown women bathe whose own husbands have never seen their bodies,” she says softly, recognizing the trust and responsibility she holds for her patients. And the responsibility goes beyond mere cleanliness. Rosa looks for bruising, which might reflect an unreported fall or a blow from an overextended caregiver. She looks for skin breaks and sores in places that the hospice nurse might not see in the course of a normal visit. She watches for pain reactions in the stoic. She listens for the signs of caregiver burnout or spiritual distress, alerting the social workers and chaplains that a call might be in order. She educates the family in the practicalities of care giving, diaper-changing, and the like. And she teaches the patient, especially the independent, to accept help, even if it’s just someone soft to lean on in the shower.

All of this sounds serious indeed, but Rosa is convinced that she has lasted 20 years in home care (the last 10 of that in hospice work) because she makes a point of doing her work with the cheerful nature of a child. As many of our patients and families tell us, Rosa and her fellow certified nursing assistants are truly “Angels Among Us” who bring a special kind of caring to the work they do day after day.