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Entrepreneurship Explored

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**Zen Hospices**

**Introduction**

The Zen Hospice Project was created in San Francisco in 1987 to help those in need of care and love during the AIDS crisis, when no hospitals were willing to take in people suffering from AIDS. People with AIDs during those times often died a lonely death because even if they were hospitalized, many staff members were too afraid to touch them. At first, some Buddhist practitioners bought a Victorian house on Page Street to create a place where people could get compassionate care and die with dignity.[[1]](#footnote-1) Soon, this project became well known for its unique way of providing care for the dying, as well as for their loved ones.

In 1990, when the organization had become well known, it opened a guest house in San Francisco’s Hayes Valley. This project was a community-based model to help those who were dying and in need of support. The community-based model consisted of staff and patients who empowered each other in the Zen Hospice Guest House. They not only helped support each other, the patients and staff, but also helped each other come to terms with the idea of death and living their last moments happily. The guest house used a model called “Mindful Caregiver Education,” which taught skills to help family members become the best caregivers for their loved ones.[[2]](#footnote-2) Later in 2010, the project remodeled and reopened the Guest House of Zen Hospice as a 24-hour care facility with a team of highly trained nurses, volunteer caregivers, and a professional kitchen staff. Its core mission continues today: “to help change the experience of dying and caregiving” and to “create space for living that offers the opportunity for individuals, their loved ones and caregivers to find comfort, connection, and healing in this shared human experience.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This organization helps patients and their families prepare for the moment of death in a loving and supportive way. Through the education model and open discussions about death, it prepares these families to accept the idea of death as a part of life.

**The Triple Amputee Doctor, BJ Miller**

For the past few years, the executive director of Zen Hospice has been B.J. Miller, a doctor and triple amputee who lost both legs and one arm in a accident in 1990. Through this experience, Miller’s view of death, human nature, and society all changed. He now views his traumatic experience as a transformative experience, understanding that “you can always find a shock of beauty or meaning in what life you have left.”[[4]](#footnote-4) He believes that the Zen Hospice Project is a way to “de-pathologize death.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The main goal of Zen Hospice is to “help people pay attention to death.”[[6]](#footnote-6) People tend to shy away from mentioning death and to view it only in a melancholy way, but it does not have to be like that. Zen Hospice aims to help people look at death differently, so that the process of a loved one dying is not a painful memory. Furthermore, Zen Hospice helps the dying “cure” their grievances over death through its Mindful Caregiver Education model. Zen Hospice creates a place where patients and their family members can learn more about death, as well as rethink their perspectives on death. In other words, this project is designed to welcome and embrace those who need to keep living while they are facing death--their own or a love one's.

**Reanalyzing the Idea of Death and Customers**

This project is innovative not only because of its mission, but also because of how it operates. Staff training is based on the Zen Buddhist philosophy of caring in a mindful way. For example, the cooking staff are expected to cook with fresh ingredients, and other staff members sometimes sit in meditative silence as they watch someone in the process of dying.[[7]](#footnote-7) In addition, the Zen Hospice Model is very intriguing and very different from the hospital model. Zen Hospice admits only applicants who have six or fewer months to live. Moreover, residents can even smoke if they want to because the Hospice wants its residents to feel satisfied in their last days of life and to do as they truly wish. The Zen Hospice Project spend about “$750 a day to care for a resident. If that same patient were in a hospital, he or she would likely incur at least five times that expense.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Thus, Zen Hospice actually save people money while providing the care that the dying need. Additionally, the project’s Mindful Caregiver Education, trains and educates hundreds of family members and professional caregivers to provide an end-of-life experience that entails the utmost in communication and care.[[9]](#footnote-9) This model provides both knowledge and emotional support to help family members and the patients as they come to terms with the notion of death.

Patients are only “hospice eligible” if their health care provider determines that they are likely to die in six months either from a terminal illness or simply of old age.[[10]](#footnote-10) Researchers have found that 40 percent of those admitted to Zen Hospice usually are in a hospital intensive-care unit, where they are likely spend only a few days before dying; therefore, these patients do not have enough time to take full advantage of what Zen Hospice has to offer.[[11]](#footnote-11) Data show that an average stay at the Guest House is usually three weeks, which, again is not enough time for patients and families to completely benefit from the Hospice program.

When people think about death, they tend to think that their life is over and that the moments they have left are meaningless. Zen Hospice wants to change this concept of death. They want to influence their patients to think death can be a meaningful experience and that those last moments of one’s life is worth living by taking advantage of the services such as the educational model and grief support that Zen Hospice provides.

**Seizing Opportunities and Expanding**

Instead of expanding and building more houses to accommodate more patients, Zen Hospice wants to spread its message about death. The organization has worked with a design firm called IDEO, which is helping Zen Hospice generate a movement that says, “dying is a human act, not just a medical one.”[[12]](#footnote-12) IDEO is a firm that creates ideas for other companies. It is an international consulting business that wants to create a positive impact on the world. IDEO's idea for Zen Hospice is to promote this organization as an acceptable public model for redefining death. Executive director, B.J. Miller stated, “IDEO would first help them ‘“better articulate ourselves to ourselves”’ — zero in on what makes Zen Hospice’s philosophy and style of care valuable, and enhance it even further.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Zen Hospice wants to change the public’s connotation of the word “death” and make it into a concept that people feel comfortable talking about. Zen Hospice wants to generate a movement whereby people can accept death as it is-an act of human nature- hence the reason that Miller partnered with IDEO to achieve this goal.

**The Present Day for Zen Hospice**

After 30 years in operation, in late June 2018, Zen Hospice Guest House officially closed due to the lack of donors to donate for their program. It had tried to persuade private insurance companies to give financial support, explaining that “it costs $850 a day to care for each patient at the hospice, compared to the thousands and thousands of dollars in daily costs for someone to die in an ICU.” Despite such efforts, the project failed to find funding during the 18 months.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, the Zen Hospice project continues and currently runs two programs: one provides volunteer caregivers 13 hours a day at an intensive care unit at San Francisco’s Laguna Honda Hospital; and the other is a course that trains family members in how to take care of their loved ones at home when their dying.[[15]](#footnote-15) The organization is very optimistic about its future; the thinking is that the closure of one space does not mean that the program will stop. Zen Hospice plans to open another space in the future, and, through the continuation of its two current programs, hopes that more people will recognize how important it is to transform death into a meaningful experience for people.

**Challenge**

The challenge has always been to convey the organization's philosophy and, as a result, to influence to the society. Zen Hospice wants more people to understand its mission and to donate to its cause. However, ever since the 2016 presidential election and the vast media attention given to Trump and his administration, long-time donors have begun to invest their money somewhere else. As they want to challenge Trump’s proposals, these long-time donors have started donating to organizations that fight for immigration reform, social justice, the homeless, etc.[[16]](#footnote-16) This challenge of being self-sustaining has always blocked Zen Hospice’s true potential, as the organization need funds to operate. Without its donors the project will be unable to continue—thus the closure of the Guest House. In addition, social norms also play a role. Most society tends to have an uneasy relationship with the idea of death. Thus, when an organization like Zen Hospice wants to “celebrate” death and ease people into the idea of it, not a lot of people will jump on board, which can be another reason for the lack of donors. In addition, some people dislike the idea of sending their loved ones to Zen Hospice because doing so will continually remind them that their love ones are going to die. In a recent interview, Emily Yip stated:

“I would be constantly reminded of their death every time I had to go visit them. I do not

want to send my loved ones to a dying ‘boot camp’ where they make friends who are

also going to die. It’s just horrible, I would rather let them live their life then rather letting them focus on their impending death. If I know my loved ones are going to die I would just let them spend their last moments of life at home with family members.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

This statement exemplifies the unwillingness to accept Zen Hospice's philosophy and way of operating. Another interviewee, Haeun Yoon, also said:

“The idea of death therapy that Zen Hospice provides is artificial to me. I believe one’s

last moment in life is to be treasured with your loved ones. Even though the Hospice

provides this service, being in Zen Hospice will always remind family members of

impeding death.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Death is a sensitive subject and one major challenge for Zen Hospice is to promote its philosophy so that people will learn to accept it. People seem to still have more trust in and a higher comfort level with hospitals, and therefore, hospitals are still the first choice for families to send their loved ones with serious illnesses, which is a huge advantage for hospitals.

**The Collaboration with IDEO**

Zen Hospice does not have competitors in the traditional sense--i.e., it does not compete with other organizations for clients. Its mission continues to be creating a space where patients facing the end of life can find the types of support they need. To achieve that goal, they are collaborating with the design firm IDEO, to create the right kind of message and the way to convey it. As it happens, the chief creative officer at IDEO, Paul Bennett, became very interested in the idea of death after his father died. His goal was simple: he did not want death to be viewed so negatively anymore.[[19]](#footnote-19) Bennett’s philosophy goes hand in hand with Zen Hospice's; thus, it was a great collaboration. Instead of partnering with an organization that hires therapists and psychiatrists to work with the dying, Zen Hospice stayed true to its philosophy. On the Zen Hospice website, it says: “We consider our community of volunteer, clinical, and administrative staff to be one of our strongest assets. Regardless of our role or position, each one of us sees ourselves as a caregiver—and our lives are enriched by those we serve,”[[20]](#footnote-20) the staff is made of volunteers who willingly care for dying patients because they see it as an opportunity to fulfill themselves as human beings.

**The Next Step**

Zen Hospice used the IDEO platform, to invite people to give their opinions and ideas about what the organization should do to improve its standing. IDEO consists of a “community of designers, entrepreneurs, engineers, teachers, researchers, and more. Our shared values and beliefs influence the work that we do, and the impact we hope to achieve.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Through its service OpenIdeo, the company also uses the idea of crowdsourcing to invite people from all around the world to participate in a challenge proposed by a company. There is a six-step process that includes research, ideas, refinement, feedback, top ideas, and impact to create a great idea.[[22]](#footnote-22) Through these six steps, companies that worked with IDEO could gain insight from other perspectives on their next step to improve their standing. Thus, Zen Hospice partnered with OpenIdeo and posted a challenge topic on its website:

Each year around 55 million people worldwide and over 2.5 million in the United States

face the end-of-life. In the U.S., the end-of-life experience has shifted dramatically since

the 1950s, as death has moved away from the home into institutions like hospitals and nursing homes. By the 1980s, less than 17% of people died at home. We believe the people and unmet needs behind these numbers inspire a huge opportunity for design.

With your help during our End of Life Challenge, we’ll work to reimagine the end-of-life experience for ourselves and our loved ones.

Through this challenge and the use of crowdsourcing, Zen Hospice could gain perspective in other areas they may never have thought of before. An organization like Zen Hospice needs to come up with innovative ideas that can advance the challenging goal that they want to achieve. Death is a sensitive subject, and one must approach people with the right tone and content when talking their views on death. One interesting idea on OpenIdeo came from C. Elizabeth Dougherty, who presented a simple project where people “hug” each other. This activity is different than a regular hug. This version of a “hug” is when a child, or partner, sibling, parent or friend “hug” their loved ones who are in pasting, they are hugging them out of love in memories. What I mean by this, is “messages and images and reminders of the shared connection with their loved one - in essence, the “Hug” becomes a tangible expression of their love”.[[23]](#footnote-23) This activity will create an opportunities for families of loved ones who might die to share their love and have the opportunity to say goodbye with a simple hug. This idea showcase that sometimes one simple action can be expressed in many words.

With inspirational stories and ideas coming in from various people on the internet through OpenIdeo, Zen Hospice, may be able to develop a plan for re-opening its guest house and reaching more people. More publicity and a greater outreach to the public is crucial. Consider, for example, the aforementioned student, Emily Yip. She did not even know about the Zen Project or that its guest house was located a mere ten minutes from where she lived in San Francisco. In the future, Zen Hospice can work towards finding a method to integrate its core values and concepts into the society without conflicting too much with society norms regarding the issue of death. Death can be a difficult concept, and it is extremely hard to change a society's way of thinking about death. Although Zen Hospice lost its physical site, it still has options for continuing its work—for example, by partnering with hospitals to integrate its program into traditional end-of-life care.

**Conclusion**

Although accepting death is hard, it is not necessary for people to have to face it alone and without support. This is the mission of Zen Hospice. Clearly, some people do not want to take part in programs such as The Zen Hospice project--because they are private people; because they want their loved ones to die at home; or because they don't accept Zen Hospice's philosophy of death and dying. Yet, there are others who view Zen Hospice as a helpful transition for those who are dying and for family members that do need help to accept that their loved ones are dying. Although, it is difficult to change people’s perspective on Zen Hospice notions, the need remains. So, even though it might be closed right now, in the future, the Zen Hospice Guest House can be reopened. Many people have different perceptions of death, and those whose views coincide with Zen Hospice will be the organization’s hope for its future. Through partnerships with IDEO and hospitals, Zen Hospice still strives to change society’s belief about death and dying.

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   This case was prepared by Angela Zheng (NYU Shanghai ’21) for classroom instruction and is not intended as a reliable guide to effective managerial action. Any views represented here are those of the author(s) alone. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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6. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Martin, Courtney E. "Zen and the Art of Dying Well." The New York Times. August 14, 2015. Accessed September 24, 2018. https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/zen-and-the-art-of-dying-well/. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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11. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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17. Emily Yip, student at NYU Shanghai. She is 18 years old and a female, born and raised in San Francisco, California. The question was: “Imagine your love ones going through death in a regular hospital, knowing that they will die. Would you open up to the idea of sending them to Zen Hospice? [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Haeun Yoon, student at NYU Shanghai. She is 18 and a female, born and raised in Seoul, South Korea. The question was: “Imagine your love ones going through death in a regular hospital, knowing that they will die. Would you open up to the idea of sending them to Zen Hospice? [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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