



# NO PLACE LIKE WORK

Sophie Bryer (right) and Bobbie Mims are encouraged to personalize their workspaces at Hospice & Palliative Care of Washington County.

PHOTO BY DENISE FARWELL

By Ben Jacklet

When you envision the perfect work environment, a job caring for the terminally ill probably doesn't come to mind. Spend an afternoon with the employees of Hospice & Palliative Care of Washington County, however, and you may change your mind, or at least open it.

The Hillsboro nonprofit (No. 20 Small Company), rated second among small businesses in the sub-category of work environment, even though it performs some of the most emotionally draining work imaginable, meeting the physical and psychological needs of terminally ill patients and their families. Yet the hospice's employees beam with pride as they describe their work environment, the culture they've built, the sense of teamwork and compassion, and the flexible, non-judgmental leadership of CEO Christine Larch.

"The level of support we get here is just incredible," says Sophie Bryer, a social worker.

"We're all part of a team, and we take care of each other," adds Rhonda Spencer, director of clinical services. "If people want to talk and share their feelings, they can. If they don't want to talk they don't have to. But we're always checking in to make sure ev-

erybody's doing OK."

When one of the hospice's nurses needed time off to recuperate from the floods after her hometown of Vernonia was swamped in January, her co-workers pooled their extra vacation time and donated five weeks' worth.

Workplace surveys leave little doubt that work environment is tied directly to morale, a company's ability to recruit the best candidates and an employee's willingness to put forth extra effort. But there is little consensus as to what the phrase work environment even means. For the hospice team, it is a communal phenomenon that has little to do with their physical workspace, a nondescript suite in a suburban strip mall.

Elsewhere, a comfortable workspace that serves as a sanctuary from the daily barrage of stress can be crucial. That's the concept behind the



Yoga class is offered monthly in a meeting room at Rose City Mortgage as a way to help keep stress levels down among employees.

PHOTO BY DENISE FARWELL

inviting digs of Rose City Mortgage Specialists (No. 4 Small Company).

Everything about Rose City's suite space in Portland's John's Landing exudes peace, from the Buddha statues to the murals quoting Gandhi. Yoga classes are routine. The conference room is more likely to be used for acupuncture or a body-talk session than for a conference.

"This is a high-stress industry so it helps to keep our office as calm and stress-free as possible," says founder and president Renee Spears. She started the company with the idea of working from home in her sweats with her kids and dogs, but "the referrals just kept coming." She was determined to make her office as inviting as possible.

That can be a challenge in times of economic downturn. Things had gotten so bad in the mortgage industry by last September that Spears decided to celebrate Christmas in October, surprising her staff by decorating the entire office overnight and having breakfast catered the next morning.

Her motivation is simple: "I've got great people working for me. I want to keep them."

That sentiment is echoed vigorously by the Oregon management

team of U.S. Cellular, the Chicago-based company that takes first place again this year in the large business category for the third year in a row — never mind that midway through its winning run the company laid off more than 160 Oregon employees when it closed its Medford call center in 2006.

Calvin Emigh, director of sales, says the company did all it could to soften the blow and keep up morale. "The associates who were impacted by the closing of the call center were not just sent a letter. The CEO and his team came out in person and explained what was happening and why. Every one of those associates was offered a position at another call center. We hired back as many associates as we could and we tried to help with job placement for the others."

Apparently it worked. Not one U. S. Cellular employee mentioned the layoffs in this year's questionnaire. More common responses praised the benefits, the team atmosphere, and the emphasis on making the workplace an enjoyable and fulfilling place to be.

In that regard, people who sell cell phones seem to want the same things as people caring for the terminally ill: camaraderie, respect and trust. **OB**