

Rebecca Freeman

Bringing Hope and Comfort to Families, Healthcare Providers:

Melding passion for ministry with expertise in grief and loss support

Rebecca Freeman knows loss and grief. She's navigated the death of a loved one. Picked up the pieces.

Today, the Perinatal Pediatric Palliative Care Chaplain at Miller Children's & Women's Hospital in Long Beach walks families through their grief and healing. A 2016 graduate of the Franciscan School of Theology, Rebecca is a Board-Certified Chaplain and Certified Child Life Specialist who combines her passion for ministry with training in hospitalization, illness and grief support to help families, and the healthcare and environmental service providers who walk with them, through the loss of a child.

We recently caught up with Rebecca to talk about her work and time at FST.

FST: *You have a bachelor's degree in child development with an emphasis on child life in hospitals and a master's in divinity. Walk us through your journey. How did you start down this path?*

Rebecca Freeman: I went to college knowing I wanted to work in a hospital. I had volunteered at a local children's hospital and picked a school, Mills College, that supported my undergrad.

While I was in college, my father was diagnosed with a malignant form of brain tumors that started growing. They had been present since my childhood, but this time it was worse. His death, at a pivotal moment in my life, led me to our chapel on campus that helped me move forward in life and in grief.

FST: *When did you realize ministry could play a role in your career supporting patients and families?*

RF: I was going to church up the road from school where Jeff Burns [*Assistant Professor of U.S. Church History at FST and Deacon for the Diocese of Oakland*] and his wife Sabina became instrumental in my journey. Jeff was inspiring and very supportive of my becoming a chaplain and introduced me to FST.

Doors just opened. It was synchronicity. God was at play. I asked, 'Can I hold both worlds working with families and ministry?' Knowing one will inform the other and they will weave beautifully together.

FST: *Tell us about your time at FST and introduction to Franciscan spirituality.*

RF: Everything I was introduced to was so aligned with my beliefs and values. There was a spirituality that I hungered for. In our Catholic world there is a new, fresh idealism that is represented after Vatican II. At FST, people from all walks of life share in scholarship and practical theology.

There is a live ministry happening and I was always journeying with people who were informing my journey. It was a constant nurturing. Here is this saint from the 13th century, and it may seem crazy to think that we are following his teachings, but look at how it continues to shape our world. There is

a goose bump feeling that I carry forward that I can claim to be a part of his vision even in some small way.

FST: *Where has the road since FST taken you?*

RF: My goal was to always go down the professional chaplain route. I did my residency at UCLA Medical Center and tacked on an extra residency year to gain more experience. Here, I worked as an adult palliative care chaplain and continued my other unit coverage as a neonatal chaplain where I implemented programs around staff care. After I got board certified and had to defend my work and practice, I did some per diem chaplain services. I was then hired at Miller Children's & Women's Hospital.

My hope and prayer were always to go back to working with children and families.

FST: *Take us into your ministry supporting families and the workers who care for their children.*

RF: With palliative care, there is an added need for compassion. These families are dealing with life-changing diagnoses. It has been an absolute incredible journey that I'm incredibly blessed to serve within.

Staff care has been an interesting cross-section of my work. Seeing the challenges that these nurses and staff are dealing with; I saw the need for developing and compiling care for them. There is a lot of hard stuff that these teams go through, and we're taking an interdisciplinary approach to look at how we can support staff and our environmental services workers who form relationships with children and families.

How do we ensure that they have space to grieve and self-led spaces to share with one another? We are developing affirmation and coping strategies that team members can use and are really trying to surround our staff and let them know that it is OK to have these feelings and process them so that they can be there for the next family that comes along.

FST: *How has your time at FST and connections made continued supporting your work and ministry?*

RF: I developed life-long friendships. Even though post-FST life has meant that these relationships are all over the world, we are still in touch. We have prayer chains and updates. The staff and professors are the same, and I also have them as a resource. We have that instant connection and instant trust in brainstorming things in our life and ministry. This is another great treasure that I wasn't expecting, but I am so glad that it came about and that I have this going forward for the rest of my life.