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Confronting death with compassion

Service spurs discussion about end of life, helps cope with loss

BY JEFF LABINE
THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

Janis DeGagne knows firsthand the benefits of Hospice Northwest.

Not only has she volunteered for them for about 20 years, but those same services that aim to help people who have lost loved ones were there for her too.

"I think there's a lot of times you are thinking about other people's needs," she said. "I think death is a taboo subject in our

society. We need help to be born and we need help to die and to prepare to die. Hospice Northwest is not about dying — it is about living a full life."

Four years ago, DeGagne's husband, Leo, died after being together for 45 years. She decided to go into a six-week grieving program to help her with her loss. She described it as being very intimate with plenty of helpful exercises to help deal with her grief and feelings.

She said it was helpful to her and was something she hadn't really dealt with before.

"My clients were either in their own homes or just going into the hospice," she said.

"It is just a way for you to give to your community in a very worthwhile and inclusive way. The companionship and support that Hospice Northwest offers to its volunteers and through its programs is not always to the community light. A lot of people are surprised when they find out there is such a support group, and yet, people who have come to me for support, you will see them as they support me in my walk."

DeGagne was one of 150 people who participated in the fourth annual Hospice Northwest walk around Boulevard Lake on Sunday. The event gave participants a chance to walk a route of either three or five kilometres. The annual walk is a major fundraiser for the local hospice, which relies on charitable donations to help run its programing.

DeGagne was walking for her husband as well as her mother, friends and her sister-in-law. She said she finds the walk to be a light-hearted and fun filled activity that is in memory of loved ones.

Board chairwoman Kathy Kortez-Miller explained the hospice is run mostly through the efforts of volunteers, with the exception of three staff members. She described it has being



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Around 150 people participated in the annual Hospice Northwest Walk around Boulevard Lake Sunday. Walkers could take routes of either three or five kilometres.

very community driven with support given to individuals across the region.

"We also offer a grief and bereavement support group, which is unique to our area because it was an area that was lacking," she said. "Palliative care is improving and growing in general. But one in three Canadians will not receive palliative care because of resources. We know here in the North we lack in services. I would say we are growing but we need the support."

She added people are afraid to discuss death and it is something they are working to change through initiatives like Dialogues, which brings groups of people together to talk about end of life.



Participants of this year's Hospice Northwest Walk toss a flower over the bridge near Boulevard Lake on Sunday.