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Kathleen Buso of Hospice Northwest, left, along with Rev. Randy Boyd of Trinity United Church and Allison Skirtschak, prepare for a candlelight memorial service Dec. 1 at Trinity United Church.

Coping with grief

Community partners offer support during holidays

BY SUSAN WADE
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For Allison Skirtschak, the holiday season is entwined with memories of food and family. At the heart of those memories is her Opa, her grandfather, Ilko Skirtschak. Skirtschak's face lights up as she describes her Opa and Omy, her grandmother, lovingly working together on Christmas Eve, serving up traditional Ukrainian and German dishes prepared from scratch.

The family would then gather at the table, hold hands, and pray.

One of Skirtschak's fondest images is of the family at midnight mass, listening to the choir in the church where Opa worked as a caretaker for most of his life.

Her beloved grandfather died four years ago, just a few weeks before Christmas.

"He was a kind-hearted, gentle man," Skirtschak says. "He was our family's chief, the person who would always listen with compassion."

Last Christmas, Skirtschak was looking for a way to honour his memory. She was drawn to the Wings of Remembrance Ornaments, offered by Hospice Northwest. The spun-glass angels, butterflies, or doves, personalized in memory of a loved one, seemed to be a perfect gift.

Skirtschak mailed five of the doves to her Mom, Omy, and close family members in southern Ontario.

The choice was fitting for a man who lived his life based on peace and faith.

"It's a special symbol of Opa's presence," Skirtschak says. "I'm reminded of him every day in so many different ways."

Pat Skirtschak was deeply moved when she received this gift of love from her daughter Allison.

"It was so touching when we all opened them up together and saw the peace dove," she says.

"Because Opa created peace for all of us in our family. It was really a treasure."

The Wings of Remembrance Ornaments have been sent across Cana-

da and the United States, spreading their message of love and remembrance.

Kathleen Buso of Hospice Northwest says that people are usually brought to tears when they receive one of the keepsakes, although she reflects, "they are good healing tears."

Hospice Northwest is helping people heal in other ways this holiday season.

One-to-one grief counselling is offered, as well as a bereavement support group.

There will also be a candlelight memorial service on Dec. 1 at Trinity United Church, a collaborative effort by Hospice Northwest, Trinity United and St. Paul's Anglican Church.

"No one can deny the power of memories."

Deborah Kraft

Archdeacon of St. Paul's Anglican Church

Rev. Randy Boyd with Trinity United says there's a heightened excitement as Christmas approaches, which can often accentuate the grief over losing a loved one. A memorial service can comfort.

"It's saying you're not alone, there's a need for a time to gather and express the deep grief we feel at what is a joyous time of year," Boyd says.

The sentiments about the relevance of a memorial service are echoed by Archdeacon Deborah Kraft with St. Paul's Anglican Church.

She'll be leading the service along with Boyd.

"It's about allowing people to be authentic in their emotions," Kraft says. "By having people in a safe place where we can show deep emotions, deep grieving and be together

in community."

The service will include readings, prayers and the chance to light a candle in honour of a loved one who has passed away.

Another powerful tribute, ice candles created by Hospice Northwest volunteers, will light the path to the church.

Both Kraft and Boyd see the power and symbolism in candlelight.

For Boyd, the flickering is a reminder of how tenuous life is. It can go out in a flash.

"The light may be out, but it's a reminder the spirits live on in the people who loved them."

In faith tradition, light is something important, Kraft points out.

"When we light candles, we are saying the memory of this person is very important to us," she says.

The memorial service is non-denominational.

Boyd's wish is that everyone will feel comfortable attending. Grief, he says, "is a universal experience. It doesn't matter what faith. When we share it, we find ourselves strengthened by it."

Trinity United is sharing in other ways. Each year, the church donates 10 per cent of its fundraising dollars to community organizations in the city. This year, Trinity is partnering with Hospice Northwest.

One example of the partnership, the Wings of Remembrance Ornaments, will be on sale at the memorial service.

For Kraft, the symbols, whether a hand-spun ornament or a candle lit for a loved one, have the ability to move people through their grief.

"It's a reminder that the person is always with them," she reflects. "No one can deny the power of memories."

The Candlelight Memorial Service takes place Dec. 1, starting at 7 p.m. at Trinity United Church on South Algoma Street.

Wings of Remembrance Ornaments can be purchased for \$25 by contacting Kathleen Buso at Hospice Northwest, at 626-5573.

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