

Holidays tough for grieving

Hospice Northwest pilot project helps survivors cope through sharing

BY SUSAN WADE
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

SUSAN Imperius is feeling a sense of loss this holiday season.

It will be the first Christmas without her beloved twin sister, Dorothy May, who died earlier this year after a long struggle with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). She was 70.

Imperius misses the special bond she had with her twin.

"When she died it was like a part of me was gone," says the Thunder Bay woman. "The spiritual closeness we had isn't there. I just miss her desperately."

After the death of her sister, Imperius tried to cope as best she could. But it was only after she received a phone call from Hospice Northwest that she broke down, and realized she needed help with her overwhelming grief.

That help came in the form of the Grief Support Group, a new partnership between Hospice Northwest and the Alzheimer Society of Thunder Bay.

The pilot project, recently launched in the city, wrapped up its first session earlier this month. Another will be offered early next year.

Every Tuesday night for six weeks, Imperius met with others grieving the loss of a spouse, a child or a sibling, to share their stories and their pain.

Margie Urainen ran the group. She's the Education and Family Support Facilitator with the Alzheimer Society.

"My role is literally to be a heart with ears," she says, adding that she relied on her training as a social worker and her own personal experiences with grief to help group members come to terms with their loss.

Grief is like a snowflake, or a grain of sand, Urainen explains.

"No two are the same but they're still made up of the same ingredients. For the members of this group, the common denominator is the fact that they are all dealing with their grief."

Honesty. Support without judgment. These are among the guiding principles for the group. So is confidentiality.

"It's important for them to be able to share openly. They're very vulnerable," says Urainen. "Really, what are they gaining if they're not able to share their stories?"

The most important thing is they know whatever is said in that room, stays in that room.

Despite his initial reservations, it was that feeling of security — and camaraderie — that kept David Gilders coming back, week after week.

The 80-year-old Thunder Bay man lost his wife Dorothea just nine months ago. They'd been married for more than 52 years and he was feeling very much alone.

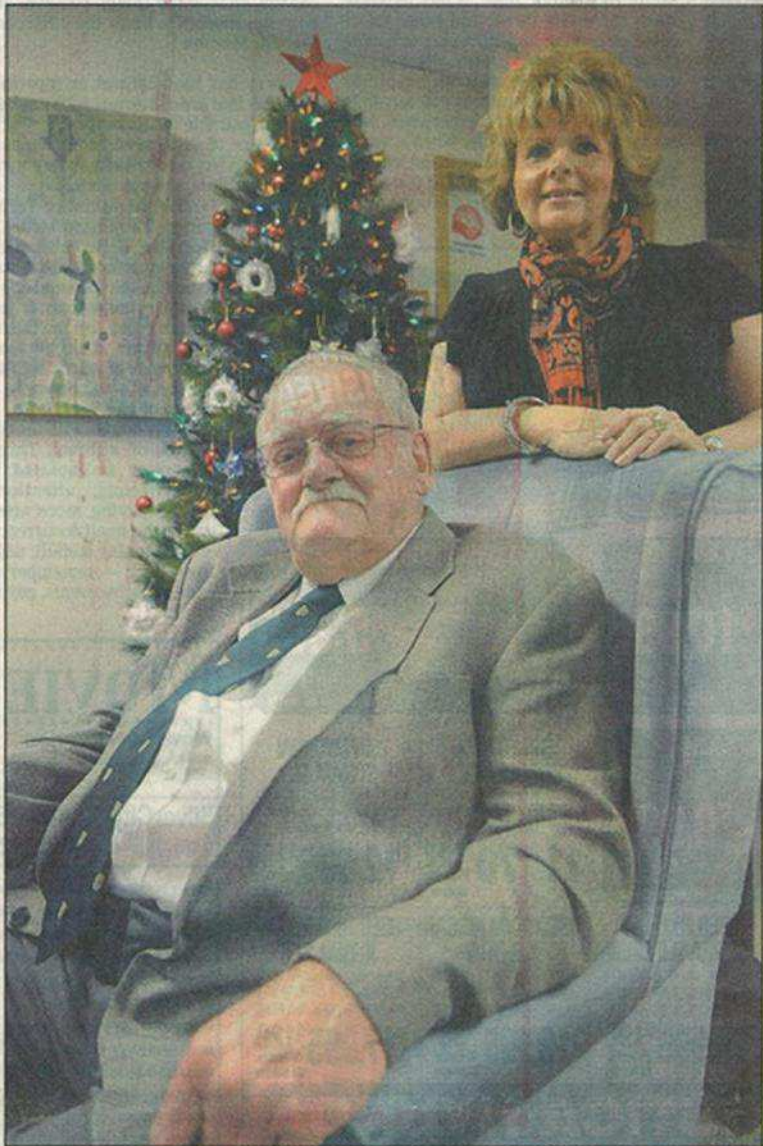
As a nurse, his wife helped many people into this world, and out. She understood sorrow.

"Dorothea would be so happy to know that I was getting support, and being compassionate to others as well," Gilders says. "I felt a gradual sense of mutual sympathy, of mutual mourning."

Katherine Poulin saw that sense of support and empathy grow each week.

As a volunteer with Hospice Northwest who helped run the sessions, she says people in the group learned to trust the process — and each other.

Poulin recalls one special night of sharing, when participants brought pictures of their loved ones to the meeting.



THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL/BRENT LINTON

David Gilders attends a grief support group run by Margie Urainen, a social worker with the Alzheimer Society of Thunder Bay. The group is a partnership effort of the local Alzheimer Society and Hospice Northwest.

It was a defining moment. "Just to watch everybody around the table, waiting for their chance to speak," Poulin remembers. "You could just see they had such pride and they just wanted everyone to understand how great their loss was."

Urainen wants to continue to help more people cope by providing future support sessions.

"As long as there's a need and people want to come to the group I'll be there," she says. "That's a commitment I made, to support other people in their grief. As long as I live."

The next Grief Support Group starts Feb. 15. Hospice Northwest is looking for participants.

In addition to the Support Group, the not-for-profit agency offers several other ways to assist people as they deal with their grief through the holidays. One-to-one grief support with a trained volunteer is available to those who prefer a more private setting to talk about their loss.

Hospice Northwest is also offering its Wings of Remembrance Ornaments program again during this holiday season — spun-glass keepsakes that can be personalized in honour of a loved one.

Imperius bought one for her sister last year, in memory of their father.

She says the ornament brought them together, because they both love angels.

Now, a year later, as she mourns the death of her twin, she plans to purchase another ornament for Dorothy May's daughter — her niece — to honour their mutual loss.

Although it will be hard, Imperius knows she'll get through this difficult time of year, thanks to what she learned about grief from the support group.

"I learned you have to grow through it. You can't go around it. Can't ignore it. You have to go through it. But this group is special. It helps you through it. It's a family."

Hospice Northwest is holding a Candlelight Memorial Service tonight at 7 p.m., at the Hospice offices in St. Joseph's Heritage.

Open to the public, this non-denominational service will feature music, readings and the opportunity to light a candle in memory of a loved one.

The evening will help you to reflect upon your loss and restore a sense of hope for the upcoming holiday season. For more information, call Kathleen Buso at 626-5573.

Susan Wade is a consultant with hudson-media, a Thunder Bay-based communications company.

TONIGHT

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