

Honouring and respecting life

BY KELLIE HUDSON
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They come in different sizes and different colours — black, dark green, white, sometimes orange — but their job really is universal. Thus their name: garbage bags.

They are for garbage. Clothes you are giving away. Books to donate to the library. Junk that didn't sell in your summer yard sale. The leaves you raked off your lawn last weekend.

The association is clear — garbage bags are for stuff you don't want or value.

That's why it hurt so much when Kathy Poulin received one at the hospital, just hours after her mother passed away.

In the clear plastic bag she could see her mother's slipper and housecoat, her hairbrush and toiletries. The nurse wouldn't make eye contact as she handed her the bag, along with her mother's wedding ring and gold chain.

"It seemed so undignified to see things my mother had worn that day, crammed into a plastic bag like trash," the 53-year-old Thunder Bay woman recalls. "I know the staff meant no disrespect and yet it felt so disrespectful. The nurse was almost embarrassed to hand me the bag."

Marilyn Stephenson understands how Poulin feels. A nurse, she was often given the grim task of asking family to take away the personal effects of their loved ones who had just died.

"Inevitably, we would hand them a black plastic garbage bag to do this," says Stephenson, now retired after a 35-year nursing career. "Every single time, a piece of me died inside."

This rather thoughtless practice continues to this day, in many hospitals and long-term care facilities.

Is it because these places aren't equipped to deal with personal effects of the deceased, too busy trying to help the living? Or does it speak to a larger issue: society's fear of death and dying?

Maybe a bit of both, but probably more so the latter, says Dr. Kevin Miller.

And he should know. As a General Practitioner of Oncology at the Thunder Bay Regional Cancer Centre and a Palliative Care physician with the cancer program at the Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre, Dr. Miller deals with death every day.

He understands the fear and stigma attached to it.

"Generally, we as a society see death as a failure, rather than the inevitable conclusion of the gift of life. Whether we believe in an afterlife or reincarnation, or nothing, we must face the knowledge that this journey is done,

Hospice's memory boxes help the grieving process

And it's in that conclusion, that finality that we are reduced to fears. What if this is it? All there is?" he asks.

"In palliative care, we give families permission to communicate these fears — to help them articulate the emotions which are hard to put into words and to channel their grief into meaningful memories of the one they have lost."

Facing fears, coping with grief and cherishing memories — that's where Hospice Northwest's Memory Box Campaign comes in.

It's a simple concept, actually. A tastefully-wrapped box, with a poem and some grief counselling information taped to the lid on the inside.

And yet, it means so much.

"A garbage bag is so impersonal. To be able to put the possessions of your loved ones into an attractive box instead, it truly helps with the grieving process," says Joan Williams, Executive Director of Hospice Northwest,

a non-profit organization dedicated to providing compassionate support to individuals and their caregivers as they face the challenges of living with a life-threatening illness.

Hospice Northwest started making memory boxes about a year ago, after a volunteer saw a similar program at the Hospice Palliative Care Unit at St. Joseph's Care Group in Thunder Bay.

Williams says she and her staff then approached various long-term care facilities around the city with the idea, and the response has been so overwhelming, they've had trouble keeping up with the demand.

That's why Hospice Northwest decided to launch its Memory Box Campaign this week, as part of World Hospice & Palliative Care Day, which takes place on October 10th.

Williams is appealing to people to either help wrap or to donate supplies.

As a volunteer at Hospice Northwest, Poulin has wrapped many a box.

She says it's a way to honour her mother's memory — and to help others.

"I see these families shell-shocked. It's just a small gesture, but to know someone made a special effort because they know how you feel," she says. "That kindness makes the world of difference as you walk away from your loved one for the last time."

For Dr. Miller, the concept of a memory box is symbolic.

"A box with wallpaper is truly a small thing, but it speaks volumes to the fact that we value the memory of the deceased. Their belongings are worthy of something special,



Memory boxes. Some wrapped some waiting to be wrapped.



PHOTOS BY KELLIE HUDSON

Kathy Poulin holds an old photograph of her late mother. When her mother died, Poulin was handed her personal effects — slippers, housecoat, hairbrush and other toiletries — "crammed into a plastic bag like trash." It was a terrible experience, she says.

not just a non-biodegradable black or green plastic oil product bought for three cents at your local store," he says.

"The unspoken message of the box is that we all acknowledge the importance of their memories — we all honour and respect the life extinguished."

October 10th is World Hospice & Palliative Care Day. For more information on Hospice Northwest's Memory Box Campaign, please call 626-5570.

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