

Hospice Northwest seeks volunteers who speak more than English

BY ERIC SHIH
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Come ti senti oggi?

That's Calabrese Italian for: "How are you feeling today?"

As a volunteer with Hospice Northwest, it's a question Libby Halvorsen asks quite a bit on behalf of her clients. Because of her Italian heritage, Halvorsen (nee Garofalo) is often placed with people of a similar background.

Speaking the same language, sharing the same culture — it's so important for someone nearing the end of life. It's a lesson Halvorsen learned caring for her own mother, Pierina, who died 10 years ago of ovarian cancer.

"It's frightening for anyone faced with a terminal illness," Halvorsen says. "But imagine facing a terminal illness and not speaking the language."

Her mother, who stayed at home to care for the children, never really learned to speak English.

When Pierina was placed in a local hospital, she did not like being left alone with nurses she couldn't talk to.

"She always wanted family around," Halvorsen recalls.

Eventually her mother got a Hospice Northwest volunteer to help her, an older woman who spoke Italian.

"She was very useful," Halvorsen remembers of the volunteer, who gave her family a respite, and allowed her dad to go for a bite to eat.

Halvorsen decided to get involved in hospice care in part because of her mother's experience. Right now, she's paired with a client who can only speak Italian.

"No family members are around to ask if she is OK, so I ask," she explains.

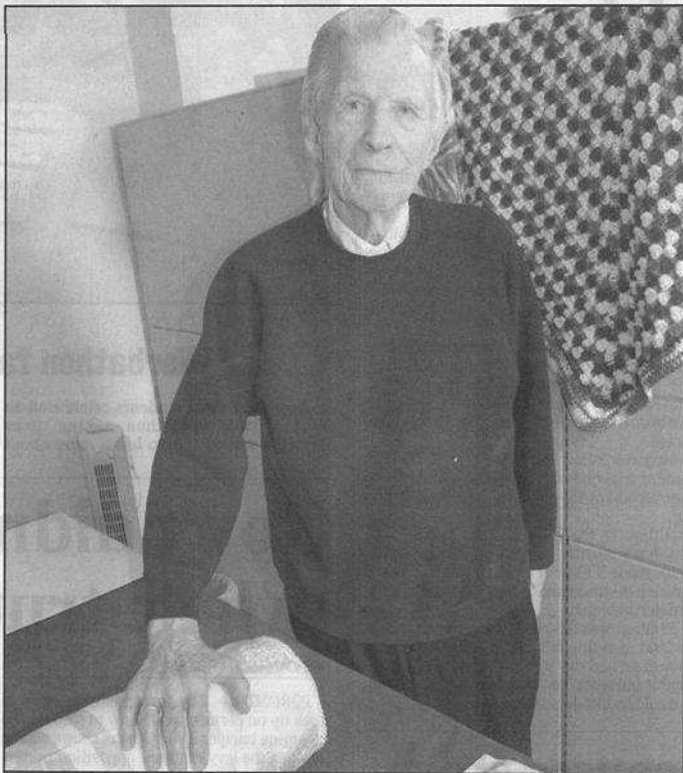
Halvorsen says her ability to speak a second language benefits other family members as well, because often they don't have a good grasp of English either.

Alfred Mayr says his background — he's Austrian and speaks German — helps him connect with clients. The 86-year-old Thunder Bay man must be doing something right, because earlier this month he received the 2010 June Callwood Award, honouring hospice volunteers across the province.

He's been helping with Hospice Northwest for the past 2 1/2 years, since his wife died.

His motivation? To give his clients the same promise he gave to his wife during her final days: that she would never be alone.

Hospice Northwest is a non-profit organization that provides compassionate support to individuals and their caregivers who face the challenges of living with life-limiting illnesses.



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Alfred Mayr is a volunteer at Hospice Northwest. His ability to speak more than one language is an asset to the non-profit agency. Earlier this month, the 86-year-old received the 2010 June Callwood Award which honours hospice volunteers across the province.

"Very sick people have tendencies to look for friendship," Mayr explains. "If you speak another language, they point it out to you. They say, 'You speak German too?' It makes them feel better."

Mayr says language is a gift to be used over and over again.

But sometimes it's more than just the language. It's the cultural connection.

Volunteer Bob Fenton says his aboriginal background gives him a greater understanding when he's paired with a First Nations' client, because he's familiar with cultural practices.

"The patients are more at ease and able to speak more openly about their lives," Fenton says. "The intimidation between cultures is eliminated."

He adds there's a need for more aboriginal volunteers, in all capacities.

"As more aboriginal people become aware of the services of Hospice Northwest, the needs will increase," Fenton says.

Hospice Northwest is always looking for volunteers, says volunteer co-ordinator Terri Kannegiesser.

But because Thunder Bay is so multicultural, with thriving Italian, Finnish, Ukrainian,

Polish, Slovakian, First Nations and French communities, the agency is strengthened by having people like Halvorsen, Mayr and Fenton, who can speak a second language or who come from a multicultural background.

"We even get referrals for people who speak Vietnamese or Chinese," Kannegiesser says. "Often times at the end of life, people return to the comfort of using their mother tongue. Especially when people have no one, it's so much easier to communicate in the language that comes most naturally. We don't have many volunteers who speak all of these different languages."

Kannegiesser is capitalizing on two events taking place this week to raise awareness about the demand for multilingual volunteers.

First, the annual Folklore Festival in Thunder Bay, a two-day celebration of multiculturalism in the city, starts Saturday.

The Bayshore Home Health Butterfly Boogie fundraiser for Hospice Northwest takes place Saturday, kicking off National Hospice Palliative Care Week 2010.

Kannegiesser hopes the celebration of different cultures and the national spotlight on palliative care will encourage people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to consider volunteering with Hospice Northwest.

"We want to build a diverse volunteer base so that when a referral comes in, we'll be able to meet the specific language or cultural request, to better serve our clients."

Halvorsen knows her services are appreciated, but she says she gets as much as she gives, if not more, when it comes to volunteering.

One of her clients came from Calabria, her parents' home region in southern Italy. Halvorsen hasn't been back since she was a young child.

Through conversations with her client, she says she learned more about the area, its people and her heritage.

With both her parents now gone, Halvorsen doesn't get much opportunity to speak the language.

"I get to pick up on my Italian again," she says.

At the end of every visit, she tells her clients to keep strong. *Mantenerne forte.*

For more information on volunteering with Hospice Northwest, call 626-5570, go to the website at www.hospicenorthwest.ca, or visit the Hospice Northwest booth at the Folklore Festival.

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