

# Rewarding relationships

*Hospice Northwest volunteers say they get more than they give*

BY SUSAN WADE  
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE-JOURNAL

A warm smile comes over David Shephard's face as he shares a story with Maria Westbrook, the woman who's become his confidant.

Sometimes the talk is about a book he's reading. Other times, it turns to deeper issues. No matter the topic, the conversations and companionship have enhanced Shephard's quality of life as he journeys through terminal illness.

Now 81-years-old, he was diagnosed with serious cardiac disease last November. Doctors gave him just months to live.

Following a referral, volunteers from Hospice Northwest were introduced to Shephard. It was then that he first met Westbrook.

Because he doesn't have family here, Shephard says he welcomed her company.

"I've talked with Maria about things in my personal life I would not have talked to the average person about," he says. "I can talk on a deep level."

Having that closeness has made a significant difference in Shephard's life.

"I can't imagine what it would be like if I didn't have this," he reflects. "I would have turned out to be quite depressed."

For Westbrook, volunteering with Hospice Northwest was a natural next step in her life.

In the past, she helped a friend who wanted to die at home. That experience, and her search to find meaning in her life, brought her to the agency three years ago.

Westbrook admits being a Hospice volunteer can be emotionally draining, but it comes with great rewards.

"People have such courage and are so willing to share their story with you," she says. "You can only come away from it feeling good about yourself, that you've been able to give them your time and your attention."

Westbrook says it's about showing respect to the clients she works with.

"With David, I think 'what if he was my older brother, how would I want him to be treated?'"

As a volunteer, she says "that's how I try to get that sense of closeness."

Hospice Northwest is now seeking more dedicated volunteers like Westbrook, to provide support to individuals and their families living with life-limiting illness at home, in long-term care or in hospital settings.

Terri Kannegiesser is the volunteer co-ordinator at the agency.

She says volunteers take on a variety of duties,



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Hospice Northwest client David Shephard, left, speaks with volunteer John Malloy.

from being compassionate listeners like Westbrook, to running errands or providing respite for caregivers. But whatever the role, Kannegiesser says it's a reciprocal relationship.

"Volunteers get back so much more than they give," she says. "They feel better as human beings for doing what they have done."

Hospice Northwest volunteers go through an extensive 36-hour training course before they are linked up with a client.

Kannegiesser is currently recruiting volunteers for the next course, which begins in September.

While people from all backgrounds are encouraged to apply, she especially welcomes people with a second language.

The call is also going out for more male volunteers — like John Malloy.

A retired Thunder Bay doctor, Malloy was searching for a volunteer opportunity that would allow him to draw on his experience in palliative care.

He found that at Hospice Northwest, and volunteering with Shephard.

Malloy feels that as a man, he brings a different perspective to the time the two share together — whether it's talking or running errands.

As the eldest of four boys, Malloy says he treats Shephard like a younger brother in some ways. And he jokes that as brothers go, the two get along okay.

He says volunteering with Hospice Northwest has given him "a chance to be back in touch with

people who can benefit from what I have to offer."

The bond that forms with volunteers can have a huge impact on a client's life — clients like Shephard.

"When we first met David, he was depressed," Kannegiesser said. "But having two volunteers placed with him, we have seen a remarkable difference in David's spirits."

It's also given him peace of mind.

Shephard was anxious about what would happen to his three cats — his constant companions — when he passed away.

So Westbrook has been working with others to find new homes for the pets, when the time comes.

"It almost like you're a mother, you're dying and leaving your children, you want to make sure they will be all right," Westbrook says. "That's what these cats are to David."

He's relaxed about the future now, she adds, knowing they'll be cared for.

These acts of compassion — going that extra mile — are something Kannegiesser sees from her volunteers all the time.

And yet, Westbrook says she gets far more than she gives by volunteering with Hospice Northwest.

"It's an amazing experience," she says. "If you can help another person approach death in an easier or a better way, then that's a great gift that we're getting."

For more information on volunteering with Hospice Northwest, contact volunteer co-ordinator Terri Kannegiesser at 636-5372 or go to the volunteer section on the agency website at [www.hospicenorthwest.ca/become-a-volunteer](http://www.hospicenorthwest.ca/become-a-volunteer).

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Hospice Northwest volunteer Maria Westbrook.