



Sharing helps

Hospice Northwest reaches out online

BY ERIC SHIH
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IT WAS like a real-life version of the popular self-help book *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

At least, that's how Anita Sakiyama describes the Circle of Friends support group and what it meant to her late mother, Janice.

The program, offered by Hospice Northwest, is for people living with chronic or life-threatening illnesses, and their caregivers.

Sakiyama's mother was first diagnosed with cancer in late 2002. She passed away in 2004.

"Sometimes you can talk to your family, but it's that whole walk a mile in my shoes type of thing," the Thunder Bay woman recalls. "They could feel for each other and talk about how they were doing."

She was so impressed with the Circle of Friends support group, and what it did for her mother, she felt compelled to write a story about the experience.

"I thought it was important for people to know about the Circle," says Sakiyama, who first learned about the group from a nurse during her mother's chemotherapy treatments. "I think that sometimes if you don't look for these things, you miss that they are available."

Sakiyama's testimonial and others like it can now be found on Hospice Northwest's newly re-vamped website. The first-hand stories are part of the organization's hope that the power of the web will allow even greater reach into the community.

"A lot of people aren't aware of our services," says Kathleen Buso, communications co-ordinator at Hospice Northwest. "The testimonials are an opportunity to understand how our services affect the lives of real people."

Hospice Northwest is a not-for-profit charity, with a mission to provide compassionate support and assistance to people with life-threatening and chronic illnesses, and their families. Services are



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Kathleen Buso, left, speaks with Anita Sakiyama about the Hospice Northwest website redesign.

provided by staff, and more than 200 volunteers.

In addition to the Circle of Friends, Hospice Northwest offers palliative care and grief and bereavement programs. Services are offered in Thunder Bay and at several locations throughout the Northwest region.

Buso says another important feature of the new website is online client referrals. People can now request hospice services for themselves, a family member or friend directly through the website.

"We've never been able to offer that before," Buso says, adding that people also can now apply at the website to become a volunteer.

"We want people to realize that we are a place for them to turn to when they need some extra help," Buso explains. "With an updated website and a new fresh logo, we hope people will recognize us more readily and be able to access more help from us."

The logo is in the shape of a heart. She says that is deliberate — to honour the agency's many volunteers who are the heart of Hospice Northwest.

"We took the petal, or the flower-like symbol we had before, and we turned it inwards to create more of a heart," Buso says. "And we also wanted to feature two individuals interacting, so that heart becomes two people in an embrace or a one-to-one relationship facing each other."

Buso says the new visual branding includes a warmer colour palette, meaning the blues and yellows are now replaced with earth tones: brown, burgundy, and ochre.

Hospice Northwest also wants to become more visible on the worldwide web. The agency is working with its web design company to become more prominent on search engines like Google.

Sherry Ann Kelly is pleased that Hospice Northwest is trying to reach more people through a dedicated online effort, because as she says, in today's world, "that's how we communicate with everybody."

Kelly's mother, Agnes, was a client of Hospice Northwest.

Kelly also has written a testimonial on the new website, in memory of her mother. "The reason I put my story out there is because I want others to know what a valuable resource Hospice Northwest is."

The Thunder Bay woman wants more people to know what Hospice Northwest offers in terms of care. She will never forget how the organization helped her mother Agnes, who died in November of last year.

In her story, Kelly writes: "It was a great comfort to have the continuity of a volunteer who knew Agnes when she was in good health and followed Agnes through to her death. It was reassuring to have a volunteer to be with Agnes."

Kelly appreciates the organization from both sides, having also been a volunteer.

"It was the most enriching part of my life because I learned so much from my clients."

She says the experience especially helped her appreciate living for today.

"I think so often we live our lives where we're thinking about yesterday, or we're planning about tomorrow and we're not right here in the present moment."

The new Hospice Northwest website can be found online at www.hospicenorthwest.ca.

Eric Shih is a Thunder Bay-based communications consultant.