

You never know when you're going to need it: Put your best foot forward with Hospice hike



By Brock Weir

Heather R. makes herself comfortable on a couch.

In her sight line is the hand-made harvest table she's come to know so well, groaning down with fresh baked goods whose smells intermingles with the inviting scent of fresh flowers.

It's a scene that plays out in countless homes across York Region every day, and this is no exception. Only, this isn't a traditional home ? it's a home away from home for individuals nearing the end of their lives.

Heather is a familiar face at Newmarket's Margaret Bahen Hospice, where her mother has been living for quite some time. Although it is just a stone's throw from Southlake Regional Health Centre, it's far removed from a hospital atmosphere.

The 10-bed hospice opened last fall and, now fully partnered with Doane House Hospice, the Margaret Bahen is gearing up for its first Hike for Hospice, a fundraising event aimed not only to raise \$50,000 for the largely-community-supported facility, but also build awareness of the hospice option in the Region.

?We have around a \$700,000 budget to raise annually,? says Deborah Kesheshian, Director of Development at the Margaret Bahen Hospice. ?The government funds half our budget. There is no cost for the families here, so when the kids come through and they want ice cream, a bowl of soup at lunch time, they have it. We want to make sure everyone's gas tank is a little bit fuller. There is no cost to families and we want to keep it that way. Hospice shouldn't be a burden; it should alleviate their burden.?

It has certainly alleviated the burden shouldered by Heather and her family. The time immediately before Hospice was a difficult one for her family. Her father was taking care of her mother most of the time, an effort she says was ?killing him slowly? because he simply didn't have time to care for himself. She helped fill in the gaps when she could, but it was not a long-term solution ? nor were hospitals.

?We had a tour as soon as we got here and we thought it was really nice, clean, but not the sterile medical place of a hospital,? she shares. ?It is home-like, inviting, and that makes it more relaxed for families ? as well as my mom. Our main goal is to keep mum as comfortable as possible and make the process as easy for dad as possible.?

When the grandchildren come to visit after school or on weekends, they don't have the extra worry of after school snacks or the odd meal here and there. Resources are available at the Hospice, so families ? along with a dedicated nursing staff and host of volunteers ? can get down to the business of living.

?I knew this was going to be a home, but I didn't know what kind of home,? says Heather, whose mother worked many years as a nurse. ?When you've been exposed to hospitals and nursing homes and things like that for so long, this is not the norm. You get that medical, sterile environment in your head with a fast pace, but this is just the opposite.?

This spring's Hike for Hospice will go towards ensuring other local families have as positive an experience as Heather.

?Any one of us could be Heather R., we could all be in her situation,? says Ms. Kesheshian. ?We're all going to have parents or loved ones who need this home. As much as we don't know it prior to needing it, it is such a relief to know it is here when we do.

Knowing any one of us could be in Heather's position, it is important to make sure we keep the Margaret Bahen Hospice solid in the community.?

Anyone can join in the hike, which will take participants from Fairy Lake, to the Hospice on Queen Street and back again. It is designed to accommodate people of all ages and abilities, including wheelchairs, strollers and dogs.

?When we get here, we hope all the families and residents who are here will look out at this mass of people wishing them well, just being there to say we support you, your family, and we will have a moment of silence for folks who have made this their last home with their families,? she says. ?It is very important that people see what this beautiful facility has to offer because every one of us could potentially need it.?

Adds Heather: ?A lot of people are in my situation where I am not just worried about mum and my own family, I'm worried about dad because he's still living on his own. It alleviates having to worry about the cost and how everyone's going to get a meal. It is about being there with dignity and just being there with no worries.?

This year's Hike for Hospice takes place Sunday, May 6, at Fairy Lake. Registration begins at 9 a.m. Event time: 11 a.m. For more information, call 905-967-1500 x133.