

Area hospices join forces for in-person Hike

The global pandemic forced many community organizations to shift their fundraising efforts to virtual or simply onto the backburner but two area hospices are teaming up this weekend to make up for lost time as their work has continued unabated throughout COVID-19.

This Sunday, May 1, Aurora's Hope House Hospice and Richmond Hill's Hill House Hospice will come together for Hike for Hope and Hill.

While Hill House has hosted virtual hikes since the start of the pandemic, this will be the first time in five years Hope House has had a hike to call their own. With Newmarket's Margaret Bahen Hospice and Doane House Hospices holding hikes each year, Hope House would encourage their volunteers to take part in those events so there wasn't any competition for donors and participants. But this year is a special year.

It really is such a special event being able to have it in person, says Heidi Bonner, Executive Director of Hope House Hospice, formerly Hospice King Aurora. It enables us to gather together, to meet some of the families that have lost someone at Hill House or worked with Hope House and just share those wonderful memories for us. For some of our team members, they will be able to see families and teams and really celebrate the goodness that hospice does represent.

Hope House and Hill House provide important and complimentary services to the community.

While Hill House provides residential hospice care, Hope House provides several community support programs from the time of diagnosis, through to the end of life, and carries on supporting survivors through grief and bereavement programs.

The funds raised will be split between the two hospices, explains Ms. Bonner. Being able to work together and really guide families along that process in a seamless way is really important. Between the two organizations, we really can assist people from the time of diagnosis to death and beyond with the bereavement support.

This is a sentiment shared by Michelle Hambly, Executive Director of Hill House.

Working collaboratively through this fundraiser and in many different ways we're able to provide a much more seamless, integrated journey for families who are going through something, says Ms. Hambly. The Hill House component is the home-like environment with 24-hour medical expert care that is provided to those who can no longer be cared for at home and usually it is within three months or so left to live.

The pandemic, they agree, has brought several new challenges to light.

With the previous restrictions on gathering, families with loved ones needing end of life care haven't been able to go through all the rituals of death when it comes to visitations, funerals and other forms of support and ritual. In many cases, families and loved ones were unable to be present at the time of death.

That was not the case for families with members in residential hospice care, but for those who lost loved ones in hospital or long-term care, those bereavement and grief supports are needed now more than ever before.

A lot of people are seeking support for grief, says Ms. Bonner. Our grief and bereavement programs have grown quite a lot. Our specific Loss During COVID groups were really successful focusing on individuals whose loved ones died during COVID and supporting those unique experiences for them. We have been able to cater our bereavement supports for that and we have additional counselling we can offer, too. Definitely a large group of people that are really suffering after the death of a loved one and not being able to have those usual rituals and support that are available during COVID.

Creativity in meeting the needs of clients has been the order of the day during these troubled times, notes Ms. Hambly, and this creativity has extended to this weekend's Hike event.

“It is wonderful to be able to do this in a collaborative way,” she says. “A collaborative spirit in bringing people together.”

Adds Ms. Bonner: “We want it to be a safe, fun, caring event and just also it is a way for us to say thank you to the community, too. Of course, about 50 per cent of our funding comes through from the Ministry but the other 50 per cent of our costs are through the generous donations and fundraising that comes from the community. By being able to come to this event and share this time together, we're just so, so thankful to the community for the continuous support that has been able to keep [both hospices] going throughout the pandemic and not having to close our doors for a single day.”

For more on Hike For Hope & Hill, including how to participate or support participants, visit www.hikeforhopeandhill.com.

By Brock Weir
Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter