

Volunteers honoured for decades of work with Cancer Society



By Brock Weir

When John Hunter was diagnosed with cancer nearly 30 years ago, his wife, Liz, wished she had someone to turn to.

It's not that she didn't have family and friends there to support her as she helped care for John, but there are just some things you can't share with those closest to you.

'I just wished I had somebody there I could talk to and with family you can't say all the things you want to just get off your chest,' says Mrs. Hunter, 81.

John succumbed to the disease 27 years ago this week and, since that time, she has dedicated herself to those battling cancer, often acting as that all-too-important sounding board and comforting hand.

Mrs. Hunter was one of several Aurora residents honoured for long-time volunteer service on Sunday by the Holland River Unit of the Canadian Cancer Society. She was recognized for her steady 40 years of volunteerism with the organization which started with fundraising shortly after the couple immigrated to Canada from Jamaica in the 1960s.

'I was always brought up to help your fellow man in any way,' says Mrs. Hunter. 'It could just be a smile or a kind deed. There was a lot of poverty in the area we lived and we needed to help people. When I came here to a totally different lifestyle, I said to a friend, 'what can I do?' I couldn't go to work because my kids were young and I didn't want to leave them, but she [suggested] I volunteer with the Cancer Society.

'I just started going door to door canvassing.'

Things escalated from there soon enough. When her kids grew up, she was back in the workforce but continued fundraising efforts door-to-door and becoming involved with the Society's annual daffodil campaign.

'I had so many family and good friends who got this dreadful disease and I just felt I had to help them,' she explains.

But the importance of her work she and that of her fellow volunteers was poignantly driven home with John's diagnosis. Looking back over his struggle, she knew she wanted to be there for the families and caregivers of those going through the battle and as soon as the Stronach Regional Cancer Centre opened at Southlake, she was among the first people to sign up as a volunteer.

'In the Centre, I admire the care the patients get and the attention not only from the doctors and the nurses and all the technicians,

volunteers, and staff who so genuinely care, but we too learn from the patients," she says. "When I see what they bear, I put myself into their position and ask myself, 'Would I be able to handle this the way they do?' The patients are absolutely strong, but they are so grateful and appreciative of anything people can do."

Outside of the hospital, Ms. Hunter continues her annual work with the daffodil campaign and encounters fledgling volunteers, often high school students completing their required community service hours, as they become involved with the Canadian Cancer Society for the first time. And sometimes these new volunteers also find opportunities to help within the walls of Southlake as well.

"I have stayed with the students on their first time to explain to them how very important this is, that they are doing a necessity and they are doing a wonderful job," says Ms. Hunter. "They know it is a dreadful disease, but maybe they don't quite realise that, sooner or later, they are going to know somebody [affected]."

"You have to learn how to approach people on the need for funding because that is how we hope to find the cures. When my husband got it 27 years ago, and I see what they can do now, it is absolutely incredible. It makes you feel good they have come this far and a lot of it is due to the funds we manage to get. There is nothing more rewarding to me in my life now than volunteering. It doesn't feel like 40 years and if I could do more, I would!?"