

Hospice volunteer speaks up for terminally ill

Local hero

<http://www.yorkregion.com/news/article/1069694--hospice-volunteer-speaks-up-for-terminally-ill>



Hospice hero. Aurora's Susan Henderson-Harris is a volunteer at Doane House Hospice. *STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT*

Your heroes

What is a local hero?

It can be a firefighter who saves a life or a student who helps you carry your grocery bags to the car.

If you know someone you want us to consider for our local hero feature, e-mail Jeremy Grimaldi at jgrimaldi@yrmg.com

For more information on Doane House Hospice, visit doanehospice.org or call 905-967-0259.

Aurora's Susan Henderson-Harris aims to help people be heard, even near the end of their lives. She volunteers at Doane House Hospice, where terminally ill people go to seek care and relief. One of the things that sets the Aurora resident apart from other volunteers is, some five years after first volunteering at the hospice, she sought to further her education to have an even greater impact. Now, at 55, she is closing in on a degree in thanatology, the study of death, dying and bereavement in human beings.

With that degree, she hopes to become an advocate for the right to choose an alternative to end-of-life institutional care. In short, she wants to make it easy for Canadians who want to die at home or anywhere other than in hospital. Her passion for the subject was clear Monday morning when she expressed sadness at the death of NDP Leader Jack Layton. "It's great to hear that he was able to die at his home," she said. "A great many other Canadians wish to do so, but don't."

Ms Henderson-Harris applied to become a volunteer at the hospice years after her mother died from cancer. During that 18-year struggle, Ms Henderson-Harris said she had a constant knot in her stomach, as her mother's life switched from treatment to remission, then to discovering cancer again. Only four months after her mother died, her father, who had been his wife's rock for all those years, found out he had inoperable stomach cancer. He died as well. It was at this "surreal" point Ms Henderson-Harris found herself in her parents' home, dividing up their goods. Years later, she felt like she needed to start supporting dying people in the community.

Before moving into her current role as a Doane House administrator, she worked one-on-one with clients as they died. "Each one was unique," the mother of two daughters said. "Each one was a teacher in different ways." For her, spending time with people before they died was a great privilege, rather than a traumatizing experience. "To be included in that family circle at the end of life, at such a dynamic time, was a great privilege," she said. Ms Henderson-Harris helped one woman make a scrapbook of memories and photographs before she died, she remembers fondly.

Despite all the positive memories, it was during these end-of-life exchanges she often became frustrated with the system. She decided to examine how she could change it. First, she started working toward the thanatology degree, to give some credibility to her arguments. Once that's done, she hopes to move on to campaigning for change. "Hospitals are great fix and repair places, but they're not geared toward long-term dying," she said. "They're not staffed for that and it's not a good use of our health care dollars. The pattern needs to change." She said a recent survey showed 90 per cent of Canadians would choose to die at home.

However, it doesn't usually work out that way, as families are often "steered" back to hospitals, she said. "The responsibility of lending an ear for a dying person to be heard and speak freely is huge," she said. "I like to think that each of us could be validated in that way to the very end and I guess that's what my issue is."