

Working in Hospice is good for the Soul

My first hospice experience came in 1990, when I was the Support Coordinator for the AIDS Committee of Thunder Bay. A middle aged transgender woman called me from her hospice bed, and asked me to come and see her, that I needed to come right away, she had limited time. When I entered the room, she was elegant with her make-up showing her soft features, and her wig done just so. She talked about her life and career and asked if I would help her write her obituary. She gave instructions on how she wanted to be dressed and make-up and hair for her funeral. I took careful notes and read them back to her to be sure I had it right. She mentioned that she felt peaceful and a sense of relief. She asked me to speak with her family, who were struggling--which I did later in the afternoon. They agreed to honour her wishes and took the notes from me. A day later Alexandra died peacefully in her hospice room with family around her. I realized from that moment I was in the right place. In my early twenties, I worked on a cancer ward as a Registered Nurses Assistant. I would listen to patient's stories, while I bathed them and helped them start the day with a fresh gown and clean sheets.

My mother instilled the practice of charity in her children. From a young age, I was involved in raising funds for the Red Cross. Our family would do a Sunday afternoon variety show, with children in the neighbourhood performing skits, singing and dancing. My mother would sew our costumes and was the stage manager. Rows of folding chairs were set up on the front lawn and neighbours would come to donate a nickel, dime or whatever they could afford. After the show, our small group of kids aged 5-11 years, would go to the Red Cross office and drop our jam jar of coins.

I have always felt a peace and comfort working in and around grief. I was mentored by Yvette Perreault, renown for her grief

work and writings. In January of 2005, I was recruited to develop the bereavement program for Bayview Community Hospice, (later Alliance Hospice), now merged with Better Living, to provide support for individual and families dealing with advanced illness and end of life.

After two years I moved into Case Management. After a multitude of conversations at bedsides, wiping many sweated brows, holding a kidney pan for a nauseous patient or simply quietly listening to a family's worries and concerns, the most important thing I have



learned is presence. Listen to what is being asked, honour the person, and above all, be reliable. As I head toward retirement, I carry with me all the faces, the lighted candles and the stories of those who invited me to sit with them for a while.

Sheila Berry



- CUSTODIAN
- REGISTERED NURSE
- FOOD SERVICES COORDINATOR
- SPIRITUAL CARE COORDINATOR
- PERSONAL SUPPORT WORKER (PSW)
- REGISTERED PRACTICAL NURSE (RPN)
- HOUSEKEEPER

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