

## Comfort, care at Hospice Niagara gives families peace of mind

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Niagara This Week - St. Catharines | Nov 16, 2016

ST. CATHARINES — The walls of Stabler Centre will never compare to being inside his historic home in Niagara-on-the-Lake's Old Town but Dennis Bell is making the most of his final moments.

Bell retired to Niagara-on-the-Lake in the 1990s from Toronto. It was a woman, he said, who brought him to the area — his late wife Valentina McLeod. The former commercial banker spent nearly 25 years with Valentina, who died last November after a battle with pancreatic cancer, rebuilding their historic home, travelling the world and enjoying the sense of community in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Valentina died on Nov. 2, 2015 — the same day she was moving to Hospice Niagara. Now, one year later, Dennis finds himself at the hospice, also battling pancreatic cancer. He was diagnosed in April and has been at Stabler Centre since August and has made the most of the space with some personal touches, trying to make it as homelike as possible.

"There is a real feeling of caring. They do what they can to help you feel like you're at home, comfortable and part of a family," said Bell. "You can't say enough about the quality of care. They put their heart and soul into the care for you day in, day out."

It's that care that allows people like Bell a chance to try and enjoy their precious final moments, knowing the end could come soon.

"Your outcome changes... sitting around, waiting to die is not fun. You know you're not going to get better," he says. "But the support they provide you with here, means you don't have a feeling of doom, or that life has left you out in the cold. They try to ease things as you deteriorate and make you as comfortable as possible."

Strangers, he said, have opened their hearts to him — and his family. They provide the care and emotional support to assist them through the journey of palliative care. His daughter Nancy Bell-Dorfman said that's been an incredible feeling.

"You want the best possible care for your loved ones, and that is possible here," she said. "It's fantastic peace of mind for me to know he has his own space, yet is never alone with professional caregivers here 24/7."

Bell points out that it also provides him some peace of mind the way the support envelops the loved ones of those receiving care in hospice.

"Family puts their whole life on hold, which is an unbelievable response," he said. "It brings the best out in people and now she can feel comfortable knowing there are supports around me."

That's not to mention the good food, Bell laughs. The chef shops to meet his food choices and cooks up some of his favourite meals. They make him homemade soup — the clam chowder is his favourite, he says.

"That's the difference — the personal approach to care," said Bell. "The whole atmosphere is created by what they do, but also being able to bring in photographs, or I can bring own my own food or put a bottle of wine in the fridge."

He actually came to hospice in August with a grim outlook.

"I was sick enough they thought it would be a matter of a few days," he said.

But the care and expertise at Hospice Niagara helped him overcome a nausea he was experiencing and he started to eat again, ultimately "getting better even though I am getting worse".

For someone who knew very little about hospice a year ago, Bell said he has truly embraced the environment. In fact, he is passionate about becoming a champion for awareness for hospice in the community.

"There is such a lack of awareness about what a place like this is. It needs to be focused on," said Bell. "It's so important people understand what happens here. It's easy to talk about because of the atmosphere created here — their first concern is making you comfortable."



Niagara-on-the-Lake native Dennis Bell is a patient at Hospice Niagara's Stabler Centre, where he says the quality of care is fantastic. "They put their heart and soul into the care for you day in, day out," he says.

Bell said there needs to be more facilities like Hospice Niagara to widen access to such care for the residents across the region.

“Hospice to me was almost a statement in my mind that it was an infirmary environment and you quickly learn how much of the opposite is true,” adds Nancy.

Hospice Niagara executive director Carol Nagy is touched by having someone like Bell advocating for the hospice.

“Here is an amazing gentleman that, like so many people, is not defined by his illness,” said Nagy. “He is not just waiting to die. He is living his life and giving back to his community in such a significant way. It is so inspiring...he doesn’t have to speak up or use his last precious moments with his family to advocate, yet he is still giving back to his community. That’s very special.”

Awareness is a key part of Hospice Niagara’s annual Holiday Butterfly Campaign . Launched this month, the campaign is used to raise funds for Hospice Niagara — which has to raise \$1.5 million a year over and above government funding to maintain its operations and programs, but also to reflect, remember and celebrate loved ones in a positive way.

“It’s important we continue a dialogue to help people in the community to embrace death and loss as a normal part of living,” said Nagy. “Being able to remember someone who touched our lives during the holidays, we hope that brings strength to people to know the impact they had on us. It’s a chance to celebrate relationships. The trees and butterflies have always symbolized that for us at hospice. They have brought joy, inspire those good memories and we want to bring that out to the community and share that with everybody this year.”

Butterfly ornaments can not only be placed on holiday trees at Stabler Centre for a donation, but this year they have also expanded into Sears Court at the Pen Centre to continue to create awareness.

Trees will be located in the lobby of The Stabler Centre from Nov. 28 until Jan. 7, while the trees at the Pen Centre will be on display in Sears Court from Dec. 5 until Jan. 7.

For more information, or to donate, visit [hospiceniagara.ca](http://hospiceniagara.ca) or call 905-984-8766.



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