

Day Hospice Program is soul-food for the Schuits

DON FRASER

Tables of hunched-over novices are learning how to make "hug scarves" at Hospice Niagara's Day Hospice program. Clients and volunteers trace hands on soft fleece fabric, and then meticulously cut them out. The completed scarf keepsake is then given away to a family member or friend. This craftwork is a study of coordination, with music and wafts of smells accompanying the artists from the kitchen.

But Albert Schuit has decided to buck the official itinerary. Albert, a man with warm eyes and wry humour, laughs that he's all about playing cards, the camaraderie of slicing the deck, and sharing jokes. "I get asked to join in, but I can't even draw a crooked line," he said with a chuckle. Hearing that, his wife, Wendy Schuit, shakes her head: "Yup, they just can't tear him away from those card games."

For Albert, Day Hospice is a way to get away from it all, at the program offered at The Stabler Centre in St. Catharines. On a bi-weekly basis, people with a life-limiting progressive illness enjoy a free day of relaxation and companionship. It's been a real, edifying relief for him.

Albert and Wendy are a retired St. Catharines couple in their mid 60's, each facing tough health challenges. Wendy is a breast cancer patient, currently in remission. Albert is managing a multiple myeloma cancer diagnosed in 2015.

The two, who married in 1974, have lived in Fort Erie and the Garden City and continue to lead loving, decent lives. They want to keep it that way. They've raised their children, Melinda and Augustus, and are grandparents with "grand-dogs." Wendy worked as a legal secretary, and then for Niagara Region, Albert retired as a correctional officer in 2003.

Recent years, however, have changed everything and forced on them a new reality. "Certainly, 2015 was an extremely challenging year for us," said Wendy softly, in an interview inside their north-end home. Albert, who has completed chemo and done a stem-cell transplant since was quite sick but has been stable since last August.

The two were referred to Hospice Niagara by a social worker at the Walker Family Cancer Centre in St. Catharines. "Hospice Niagara provides absolutely fantastic supportive care," said Wendy. "I was completely worn out by then, so I was very happy about it. For Albert, playing cards at Day Hospice stimulates his brain; he talks to people and shares their experiences. Without that, often it's just the two of us talking to each other." Albert adds that "the volunteers and staff are very nice people. They have great entertainment and the meals are amazing."

Albert, with the help of staff and volunteers, is creating a legacy book to celebrate his life. A Schuit at-home project is using family photos to create a "tree of dreams," and that's helped them collate the good times. But, naturally, basic challenges remain.

Cooking and preparing food has been an ordeal for Albert, also a diabetic. For his wife, who typically prepares the meals, it's meant zero-tolerance with things like salt, protein and preservatives, in a renal and diabetic diet. Albert, who has Dutch heritage, also adores his cheese and milk, and those culinary joys must be tempered. Restaurants are also off the menu, for the most part. The Hospice Niagara Chef, Patrick Engel, prepares compatible dishes when Albert and other guests are visiting and for The Stabler Centre residents. Chef Patrick is also participating in a special dietary project, in association with George Brown College, to create recipes to help caregivers provide for the changing nutritional needs of their loved ones living with life-limiting illnesses.

Albert said his health situation could remain stable for some time, and he's in a decent head-space. The two enjoy waterside walks, family visits, the occasional friend passing by—just soaking in life. And Hospice Niagara is a huge relief throughout the week.

"Day Hospice is a wonderful opportunity for both the patient and caregiver," Wendy said. "We need more of these care services around. It feels like a family atmosphere there and at the Walker Centre, and that's why I feel so comfortable."

For Albert, "Hospice care gives me a break and it also gives her a break, so she can be on her own, do some shopping or whatever she has to do. It's a very positive atmosphere when I am there." Wendy adds the two are "determined to be very cheerful though this," with Hospice Niagara providing needed smiles along the way. "It's about getting adjusted, and we've tried to meet this head-on," she said, as Albert nods. "I don't think burying your head over the situation does any good. It's not going away, so you live with it. You stay positive and recognize the limitations." **BL**

Hospice Niagara focuses on improving the quality of life for people living with life-limiting illnesses, death, dying, grief and loss. We rely on community support to provide these programs and services at no cost. For more information, visit www.hospiceniagara.ca, email info@hospiceniagara.ca or call 905.984.8766.

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ABOUT THE DAY HOSPICE PROGRAM

- ✦ Day Hospice is a free, bi-weekly gathering for clients over 18-years-old, living with progressive life-limiting illness.
- ✦ Clients enjoy a day of caring companionship, entertainment and relaxation, in a comfortable setting, enabling caregivers to have a day of respite.
- ✦ A gourmet meal, entertainment, comfort care therapies and aesthetics services are provided.
- ✦ Inquiries - Day Hospice Welland: 905.735.1701
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