

Organization supports  
grieving family members  
left behind

# Palliative Manitoba provides more than end-of-life care



PHIL HOSS

From left: Jennifer Gurke, Palliative Manitoba executive director, Margaret Clarke, Palliative Manitoba former executive director, and volunteer Barb King.

KEVIN ROLLASON

**K**ARALEE Grant was a vibrant 19-year-old when she was diagnosed with a rare sinus cancer. During Karalee's treatment for the disease, she touched many lives by speaking to students about cancer and being involved in work and numerous campaign endorsements with the Canadian Cancer Society. She was honoured with the society's National Medal of Courage.

But it was only shortly before Karalee died, in March 2010, that she and her family learned about palliative care and what it could offer her.

And the family didn't hear about what Palliative Manitoba could have offered them until almost a year after her death.

"It's too bad because I now know what Palliative Manitoba could have done for us," Karalee's mom, Kim Grant, said recently.

"We could have used several of the services at that time. And, unfortunately, everyone is going to need the services at some point. When I learned about it, I thought, 'It's such a good service.' I wanted to help."

Grant is now the board president of Palliative Manitoba.

"A lot of people ask me why I'm there and I tell them I want to make it better for other families going through what we went through," she said.

Everybody dies, but Palliative Manitoba not only provides end-of-life care and helps people with terminal illnesses live a full life with the time they have, it also supports the families they leave behind.

Palliative Manitoba, formerly known as Hospice and Palliative Care Manitoba and in even earlier years as Manitoba Hospice Foundation, is a registered charity whose mission is to provide services and education that are complementary to the regular health system, as well as promoting effective compassionate care for all Manitobans with life-threatening conditions.

The organization's vision statement is: "That all Manitobans experiencing a life-threatening condition live well until the end of life and that those around them are cared for in the process."

Jennifer Gurke, the organization's executive director, said they have

volunteers who will visit people with terminal illnesses, and others who will offer telephone support to grieving family members. Last year, its volunteers visited 38 people at home or in hospital, while 64 people were supported in its province-wide telephone bereavement program.

"We want to get the word out there that we exist," Gurke said.

"Whenever people hear about our support they are keen and want to learn more."

The organization has myriad other programs for helping people. It offers monthly grief seminars, hosted by Chapel Lawn Funeral Home and Cropo Funeral Chapel, with upcoming topics including Grief Doesn't Take a Vacation, The Holidays Can Be a Difficult Season, and People Just Don't Understand. It also offers support for grieving children through its Kids Grieve Too and Teens Grieve Too programs.

The organization hosts an annual provincial palliative care conference, where more than 300 attendees from professions within the health-care field come to listen to speakers and take part in presentations and workshops, and runs Lunch and Learn educational sessions for Winnipeg Regional Health Authority nurses and its own volunteers.

It also annually puts up a Memory Tree at St. Vital Centre where people can write messages in a card to remember a deceased loved one and then hang it on a branch. Trained volunteers are at the site to offer support to people who may need it.

"We have a large reach, but without the dedication and hard work of our staff and our volunteers it would not be possible," Gurke said.

All volunteers have to take the eight-week, two-hours-a-week, compassionate-care course before they are allowed to support and care for people living with terminal illnesses and their families. Twenty-three people attended the last one.

"Our volunteers come from all backgrounds and all walks of life," Gurke said.

"Some have been supported by the agency in the past. Some have had the personal experience of losing someone who was in palliative care in the past. Most of the time it is their own personal experiences."

Gurke said the organization follows WRHA guidelines for palliative care, so they begin offering support when the individual is diagnosed as having about six months to live.

To do its work, the organization receives some funding from the United Way of Winnipeg and the WRHA, but for the bulk of its operations it relies on donations from individuals and foundations, grants, and fundraising events including its annual Hike for Hospice, Celebrate Life Luncheon, and Pub Night.

Barb King is one of Palliative Manitoba's volunteers who supports people who are dying by visiting them.

King was matched with a person last December and she met weekly with the woman — both at the woman's home and then in hospital — weekly until her death last month. She has since been matched with another woman.

"It was nothing for me, but it meant everything to her," she said.

"She would wake out of a dozy sleep with a big smile when she saw me... we fill a void for these people. And you stay with the person through until the end."

King said she mostly just spoke with the woman, including topics about death that she wouldn't articulate with her own family.

"She couldn't wait for us to set a date for the next time I would come. It was very pleasing for her."

Margaret Clarke, the organization's first executive director, said Palliative Manitoba was founded in 1983 as the Manitoba Hospice Foundation to help promote better care for people dying in the community.

Clarke said four people — a physician, a lawyer, a communications specialist, and an accountant — came together and set up the organization to follow the lead of what Dame Cecily Sanders was doing in the United Kingdom.

Sanders, a doctor who said, "You matter because you are, and you matter until the end of your life," founded St. Christopher's Hospice during the 1960s and is recognized as the founder of the modern hospice movement. Her work helped lead to the recognition of palliative care as a medical specialty by Britain's Royal College of Physicians.

"The four had a vision for what was needed here," Clarke said.

## How to help Palliative Manitoba

YOU can make a tax-deductible donation either online at [www.palliativemanitoba.ca](http://www.palliativemanitoba.ca), by calling 204-889-8525 or 1-800-539-0295, or by sending a cheque to Palliative Manitoba, 2109 Portage Ave., Winnipeg, MB, R3J 0L3.

You can become a member of Palliative Manitoba and the Canadian Hospice Palliative Care Association for \$50 for an associate (individual) membership.

You can go to its fundraising Food and Wine Pairing Gala Evening on June 8 at Riverwood Square Retirement Living, 1778 Pembina Hwy. Tickets are \$25 and include a full charitable tax receipt. Call 204-889-8525, Ext. 221, for tickets.

For more information on volunteering, go to [www.palliativemanitoba.ca](http://www.palliativemanitoba.ca) or call 204-889-8525 or 1-800-539-0295.

But Clarke said in many ways the real start of the local organization was in 1986, when it was able to get office space in Deer Lodge Centre, hire its first co-ordinator, and began initiating programs including the community hospice volunteer program and the volunteer education program.

Clarke said the organization changed its name to Hospice and Palliative Care Manitoba in 1995, before changing it again in 2015 to the current Palliative Manitoba.

"Originally it was to provide volunteer home support for people living with terminal illnesses," she said. "We began to grow from there."

Grant admits she is still dealing with her daughter's early death and attends the organization's grief seminars. She hopes others who are dealing with grief call Palliative Manitoba.

"Time does heal, but even seven years later, I mourn my daughter every day. It's a lot easier now and Palliative Manitoba has these resources to help. It doesn't cost anything and you've an opportunity for healing.

"And everybody will need palliative at some point and everybody will grieve at some point. They have helped me with my grief."

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