

A Mother's Enduring Love

“Once we accept a challenge we step into the world of the unknown and it forever changes us.” Caren Goldman

When I first joined Durham Hospice three years ago, I had no idea how much my life was about to change. After taking the volunteer training, I was matched with a client family where the mother, who had three school aged children, had terminal lung cancer. My client had not at first wanted a Hospice person for herself, but in her fierce determination to do the best for her children, she asked if Hospice could provide a tutor for the two younger ones. Thus began my first summer with the kids, who were then 7 and 9. We would sit outside on the front lawn in the shade while the little girl did work sheets and the little boy read to me perched in the tree. I would ask myself “Is this really hospice work?”

Over time my contact with the family evolved to include caregiver relief for the grandmother, who was now living with the family and was single handedly taking care of everyone. The first morning that I was there, the oldest child who was only 12 at the time, came home for lunch and when I left she said to me “Thank you for coming”. I will never forget the maturity and sincerity of that young girl. It was during my weekly morning visits with my client that our friendship developed. I came to know the remarkable person that she was:

- **her strength and courage (although bedridden), to do what was right for the kids while instilling in them right and wrong**
- **her outgoing and friendly nature – the times when she was in the hospital she seemed to know everyone**
- **her strong love for her family and for friends that had supported her**
- **and her amazing strength of will shown in the ability to attend a fund raising party (which I attended) held in her honour only one month before she passed away**

She often said to me “I wish I had known you when I was younger. We could have had so much fun!!” I came to this family to help but I received so much more in return for knowing them:

I will always remember:

- **helping the little girl build a castle for a grade 4 school project and marveling at her creativity**
- **driving to Toronto (during a tornado warning!) to bring the little girl home on a day pass from Sick Kids Hospital (she had been diagnosed with Type I Diabetes) so that she could celebrate her 10th birthday at home with her family**
- **taking the kids to visit their mother in the hospital and bringing her out to the picnic table while the kids did crafts**

- **having the honour of taking the little boy to his grade 3 Christmas Concert when neither his mother or grandmother could attend**

The day before my client's 50th birthday, she was once again hospitalized. So instead of going to the house for her birthday, I went to visit her the next day in the emergency room. Although she had difficulty speaking, I was usually able to understand what she was trying to tell me. In that sterile, bare room I decided to tape on the wall, the school pictures that I keep in my wallet of her children. I finally understood that my client wanted me to shine the light behind her bed onto the wall and the pictures. When I did, she managed to say "Thank you".

I returned to the hospital two days later with some red roses for her. She was now in a private room but was lying very still. When I spoke her name, she was only able to move her eyes and look towards me. I showed her the flowers and then got a cold wash cloth to wipe her brow. The nurse came in and said that she had already washed her, but I told her that she always liked a cold cloth on her forehead. In the 1 ½ years that I had been with her, I seemed to usually know what she wanted.

The following afternoon, I took the two younger children to the movies where they asked to see Charlotte's Web. It was such a beautiful story about life and death and friendship. When we returned home, I was told that their mother had passed away while we were at the movies. My client's children had brought us together and it seems that it was meant for me to be with her children when she died. She had trusted me with them and I'm thankful to her for letting me be a part of her family. It really is an honour and privilege to be invited into someone's life.

Six months before she passed away, my client asked me to speak at her funeral. I agreed but didn't know how I would find the strength. At the funeral, before a large gathering of family, friends, and community members, I spoke about my experiences with the family. I was overcome with emotion when a family member got up to thank the different community supports, and said "Hospice sent us an angel."

I continued for eight months to tutor the children weekly along with providing bereavement support to their grandmother. The children now live with their aunt and her family.

What I remember most about my client family was my client's strength and determination to be at the center of her family, and the grandmother's love and determination to care for her daughter at home. This is the true spirit of Hospice. When I was first matched, I wondered if I would have the strength and courage, but it was my client who had strength and courage - all I had to do was to be her friend.

*Beverley Little
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