

## **Kathleen Mullin Day Program at Evergreen Hospice**

“You can interview me any day but Wednesday.” Such was Helen Allen’s response when asked for an interview about Evergreen Hospice’s *Kathleen Mullin Day Program*. Why not Wednesdays? Because on Wednesdays Helen attends the Day Program. She wouldn’t miss it for anything.

The Kathleen Mullin Day Program is held in the Friendship Room at St. Andrew’s United Church in Markham. To an observer, it is hard to realize that two-thirds of the people in the room have life-threatening illnesses. Both the people attending the Day Program and the volunteers working with them are smiling, laughing and sharing stories. Groups of people are playing euchre. Others are reminiscing over photo albums. No one is talking about what ails them. This more resembles a social group of good and caring friends than a hospice support group.

The Day Program gives clients time away from home and away from their health issues. Just as importantly, this program gives caregivers respite and relief; a much-needed time away for them to do things on their own.

Wendy Wise is the Day Program Coordinator for Evergreen Hospice. Each week Wendy provides a stimulating program with activities such as crafts, low impact fitness routines, entertainment, card games, good conversation, and of course, good food. Special days are always recognized and if the weather is good, the program moves outside.

This is Wendy’s fifth year with Evergreen Hospice. Wendy is a graduate of the Activation/Gerontology Program at George Brown College, and her training helps her to consider the physical, intellectual and spiritual needs of the clients, not just their medical needs. Assisting Wendy this year is Julia Warren, a mature student from George Brown College who is doing her placement as part of her Activation/Gerontology program. Julia is also known as the “flower lady”. Each Wednesday morning, Julia stops at Belle’s Flowers and Gifts, and picks up flowers that have been donated for the Day Program clients.

Both Wendy and Julia independently used almost the same words to describe the experience of working with the Day Program clients: drawing strength from them; and being privileged “to be part of their journey; to learn how they cope” with the events of their lives. Both used the word ‘energized’ to describe how they feel at the end of the program each Wednesday!

Marita Concil, an Evergreen Hospice volunteer, offers a unique service as part of the Day Program. A trained massage therapist with her own business in Stouffville, she comes each week to give clients a private “over the clothes” massage, using a therapy table that Evergreen purchased for this purpose. Marita’s quiet manner works wonders. She always asks clients what is bothering them the most and if it is beyond her skills, she shares the information with Susan Taylor, Evergreen Hospice’s Supportive Care Coordinator.

Clients who attend the program are part of Evergreen’s in-home supportive care program for those facing life-threatening illnesses. Susan Taylor assesses the clients for their suitability for the program. Not all of Evergreen’s clients are able to take advantage of the Day Program.

Some clients initially ‘fight’ coming – they don’t think they will get anything out of the program. When they do come, they don’t want to leave. One client shared the comment that she had resisted coming for the longest time. But now, even on days when she doesn’t feel well enough, she comes – “How could I not?” she asked.

Helen Allen is the oldest client at the Day Program, and has her own views on life itself, as well as the program. Helen lives alone, with professional support each morning and evening, and has a wide circle of friends who help her out. But as Helen ages, so too do her friends. They aren’t always available for socializing. So she schedules the rest of her life around being at the Day Program and is an active participant in the activities – when they suit her! Helen’s background as a nurse in the cardiac unit at Sick Kids in Toronto

gives her a special affinity for what the staff and volunteers are doing for the clients. For her, the camaraderie and volunteers are what keep her coming. “There is no one kinder” than the volunteers at the Day Program.

Other clients had similar comments. But the most amount of praise, from clients as well as volunteers, was for Wendy, for her knack of coming up with the right activity and the right comment at the right time, and most importantly, her ability to treat everyone as an individual, without being patronizing.

The Day Program volunteers are a special group of people without whom Wendy could not deliver this program. Many volunteers are here because they had a connection with someone who needed Evergreen’s services. All volunteers have taken the 30 hour “Core Concepts in Palliative Care” course.

Volunteers drive clients to and from the program, socialize with them, set the tables for lunch, take turns making the lunch, help with crafts and other activities, and wash-up at the end of the day. In general, they are ‘spirit boosters’.

If there was one thing to be learned from being part of the Kathleen Mullin Day Program, it can be summed up in a point of view that both Julia and Helen share: “You can’t let life get you down. You have to live for the moment because this is it; this is what counts right now”.

The Day Program was named for Jeannette Ferguson's mother, *Kathleen Mullin*, in recognition of the generous support of Don and Jeannette Ferguson. Start-up funding was also provided by a grant from the United Way of York Region. additional funding support from The Ontario Trillium Foundation, Alan O'Dell and the Town of Markham