

Ottawa Mission hospice celebrates 10 years

178 street people died in a safe, clean place

By Kelly Egan, Ottawa Citizen June 1, 2011



In death, the hospice at the Ottawa Mission gives the homeless what life so little afforded: a palpable sense of dignity.

As it turns 10 on Saturday, the hospice finds itself a sadly roaring success: 178 have died there; drawing a last breath in one of 14 clean beds, in small rooms, set on two floors behind the venerable shelter on Waller Street.

Every passing is a story. A mother was called about the lost son she hadn't seen in 15 years. She quit her job, sat with him in the hospice every day for four months until he died; mother and child, in birth and death.

One man, a transvestite, died and was buried in a pink ball-gown, a shock when his long-lost family arrived to view the coffin. Another, Normee Ekoomiak, a native artist and exquisite embroiderer, was on death's door when he was admitted, but survived for eight years. They say he had a full Thanksgiving meal in 2009, went upstairs and was dead an hour later.

"We had so many people go into hospital and die alone," said Diane Morrison, the mission's executive director, saying that this outcome virtually never happens in the hospice. If need be, staff or volunteers will hold vigil all night.

Morrison tells a little story, the seed of why and when.

There was, in Mission lore, a rascal named Tim, who had AIDS. A regular at the shelter, he was often trouble, the subject of many fights, many barrings. He got sicker and sicker, to the point where staff had to carry him to his bed. He didn't belong in a hospital, where his street friends kept a stream of disruptive visits. (Street people are famously

suspicious of hospitals; institutions in general.) Instead, nursing care was brought to him at the Mission, until he died, surrounded by his street family in the dining room. It is what he wanted.

Thus was born the idea that street people needed palliative care, even if addicted, in a proper setting, near their friends and supports. About three years and many meetings later, the hospice opened in June 2001.

Caring for the patients can be a juggling act. Mental illness is common, as is drug or booze addiction. Informed consent can be an issue; medical problems are often multiple.

"If you've been homeless for some time, you don't really fit into the health-care system," says Dr. Jeff Turnbull, the medical director of Inner City Health, which provides the care at the hospice.

Giving pain relief is but one example. How do you treat the acute pain of a heroin addict battling cancer?

"We've become quite good at detecting which is which," Turnbull said Tuesday.

The hospice operates with a relatively small staff. There are three nursing staff there at most times, with Turnbull or a substitute visiting about twice a week. Minor medical procedures can be performed there, oxygen can be handed out, and pain medication can be managed. Patients come and go during the day; if they take a drink or a hit, nobody freaks out. "The one thing people do here is live until they die," said Morrison.

Staff make an effort to reconnect the patient with family, often long out of touch. These reunions can be painful.

"It's quite remarkable to see," said Marg Smeaton, the health services manager at the Mission. "I don't think there's a single case of family reunion where the parties have regretted it."

She remembers many touching encounters, like the son who had not seen his father since childhood, but finally understood what "you look so much like your Dad" really meant, before his father died.

One of the hospice's current patients is Arthur Quintal, 70, one of 357 who have passed through its doors.

"I was nearly dead when I was at the hospital," said the Ottawa native. He was suffering from kidney failure, a bleeding ulcer, and a chronic breathing problem. He had been living at the Salvation Army. When he arrived at the hospice, he could barely turn over in bed.

Now he's up and walking a little, but generally getting along in an electric scooter, which is decorated with little stuffed animals. The care has been first-rate, he said, to the point that he might one day leave and live on his own again, with the help of his son.

The hospice depends on a crew of volunteers. Inge Kelly, 76, a retired nurse, is one of them. She first began helping almost 10 years ago and now spends Mondays performing a variety of chores, including providing companionship to the terminally ill.

"As a nurse, one of the frustrations you have on the job is not being able to spend as much time with the patient as you'd like," said Kelly. "Here, I can do that."

She finds that patients will often unburden themselves to a volunteer because there is no prior history, no baggage, between them. She loves her Mondays, she says. "I consider it such a privilege to be allowed to be in people's lives when they're making their last journey."

The Mission even has its own plots at Beechwood Cemetery, where 51 hospice patients, finally, have a home.

To contact Kelly Egan, please call 613-726-5896, or e-mail kegan@ottawacitizen.com