

"Hope" springs for Hospice King-Aurora-Richmond Hill



By Brock Weir

Hospice King-Aurora-Richmond Hill turned a hopeful page towards its future this week, unveiling its new name: Hope House Hospice.

For over 35 years, the name Hospice King-Aurora and, following a recent expansion, known as Hospice King-Aurora-Richmond Hill has become synonymous with end of life care for individuals across all three communities. Over those decades, however, the concept of hospice care has evolved along with our communities and, for Executive Director Heidi Bonner, the time to turn that page came on Monday at the organization's AGM in Aurora.

"The idea for 'Hope House' came at our 2015 AGM," she explains. "We had Debbie Homewood, who is one of the facilitators in our group, who came and spoke about spirituality and hope in hospice care and the idea of hope seemed really weird [in this context]. But the idea that hope keeps getting redefined along your journey really struck a chord with everyone present."

"You're not necessarily hoping you'll live forever, but hoping you'll live long enough to see your granddaughter born, live long enough to have a Dairy Queen sundae. You always have hope, but it changes, even if you are hoping for a pain free death."

Indeed, hope has always been an undercurrent at Hospice, regardless of its moniker. Illustrating her point, Ms. Bonner points to a plaque hanging well above normal sightlines, an otherwise unnoticed decorative accent, emblazoned with that evocative four-letter word.

It was there when they were operating on King Road, it is currently there in their Industrial Parkway South headquarters, and it is there to stay, presiding over the organization's latest chapter.

It's a chapter that begins as hospice care experiences considerable growth in all quarters.

Over the last few years, there has been an increased value placed by the Province of Ontario on Hospice Care, Ms. Bonner says. Funding for community and residential hospices has increased, recognizing that as the population ages the need is only going to grow and hospice care, in general, is an "economical" way of tackling a growing concern.

"Hospices in general are a very economical way of supporting people," she says. "Whether that hospice care is in the home, which is what community hospices like us do, or in the residential setting, from a purely numbers perspective it is significantly less to care for somebody in their home or residential hospice than in a hospital."

Another factor in the mix is the increased prevalence of medical assistance in dying within our national conversation has brought the very concept of "dying" out of dark corners and hushed tones and into a regular part of our dialogue.

"[This conversation] helps us think about what we would like in our last days," says Ms. Bonner. "Hospice palliative care has been there all along, but I think it is really coming into the forefront and people are demanding quality hospice and palliative care. We have been here for almost 35 years doing what we do, we have seen lots of changes and I think recently a lot of changes for good."

"Community hospices like us care for people: we provide service for people right from the time of diagnosis, so the people we care for are not necessarily palliative or end of life. We really get in there to support them and their family members early on to help them

through their journey. It could be through treatment and remission and off they go.?

Now, however, there is also increased recognition towards the needs of the caregiver. The importance of providing important supports to caregivers is also a trend being recognized by the Province, who have put more money towards caregiver support. ?It is about getting in there early to help caregivers cope with a loved one who is ill and providing different supports,? says Ms. Bonner, noting the increasing participation in their bereavement support programs as well.

As much as awareness grows on the services places like the newly-minted Hope House Hospice provide, there are still nagging misconceptions out there.

Staff, volunteers and clients actively put out a ?constant education stream? that helps knock these misconceptions down, primarily when it comes to the ?Big D? word.

?Hospices are perceived as dying, end of life care and a place where there's beds, but there is a lot more to it and everybody who learns about us and connects with us gets that message,? says Ms. Bonner. ?It really is care from the time of diagnosis and it doesn't mean end of life for us. For our residential hospices, it definitely is that end-of-life piece. We are sort of that front end of care. It is one of the reasons too why we're looking at the name change.

?Our care for non-palliative care clients is growing and that name ?hospice' scared people. Their first reaction would be, ?I'm not dying, why do we need hospice?' We want to highlight that we are about living and about living life to the fullest.?

Hope House Hospice is one of six organizations who are joining forces this year under the Better Living Health & Community Services banner, which is a community partner in this week's Wild, Wild West Hoedown, hosted by Magna International. Better Living's network of hospices work together to provide hospice palliative care and support clients, families and caregivers throughout York Region.

Their share of the Hoedown proceeds will go towards expansion at Hope House; programming, caregiver and bereavement support at Doane House Hospice; the new residential hospice at Hospice Vaughan; as well as the Margaret Bahen Hospice for York Region located at Southlake Regional Health Centre.