

## SHARING LAST PRECIOUS MOMENTS

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### SHARING LAST PRECIOUS MOMENTS

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Dinie Vanderwerf's phone rings at 9:30 a.m.

Mrs. Vanderwerf is in the midst of one of her many domestic chores. Cleaning dishes, cooking, vacuuming, she cannot remember which one she was busy with when she got that call.

But she does remember the words of Annie Sherer, one of her eight sisters.

"He's dying. The family can't make it from Sutton."

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It is a snowy day in Newmarket in February 1984 but conditions are much worse in Sutton, where a man she knows only as Mr. Sedore lives.

Mrs. Vanderwerf has only met him once or twice. He is, after all, her sister's good friend, not hers.

Still, Mrs. Vanderwerf feels confident she can help, having cared for others over the past five months at a nursing home just outside Newmarket.

Mrs. Vanderwerf arrives in the lobby at the east side of York County Hospital at 11 a.m. Ms Sherer is already there, her face drawn.

But when she sees Mrs. Vanderwerf, her expression softens.

When they enter Mr. Sedore's hospital room, he is breathing heavily and his eyes are slightly open.

He is sweating.

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The curtain is drawn, separating him from the other bed, which is empty.

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Mrs. Vanderwerf is more accustomed to dancing than sitting at a patient's bedside.

She and her husband belonged to a Dutch dancing group in Toronto before moving to Newmarket in 1983. For eight years, she taught square dancing and Dutch dancing to children ages five to 12 years old at a boys and girls club once a week.

"You have to be fast, otherwise, they pull each other's hair," she explains.

While raising her six daughters, she volunteered for 15 years at a church in the Bathurst Street and St. Clair Avenue area, planning activities for developmentally delayed children.

She took them bowling, led arts and crafts and directed plays.

"They were very loving," she says.

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Mrs. Vanderwerf plans to leave the hospital at 6 p.m. because she doesn't want to leave her husband, Pete, alone too long.

He is not used to being left alone for meals.

She calls him and says, "Annie is staying. Can I stay or do you want me to come home?"

His reply comes quickly: "Stay."

She would later spend many nights at the hospital, at the bedside of patients as ill as Mr. Sedore.

But she will usually be careful not to fill Pete in on many of the details of her work.

"I don't think he can handle what I am doing," she says.

So, when she comes home regularly from the hospital and he asks, "How was your day?", she either says "good" or "not good".

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She says "good" if she has visited a patient whose room and life was filled with loved ones.

She says "not good" if the patient is alone and she is his sole support, other than the dedicated doctors and nurses who tend to him.

She worked at the nursing home for four years in the '80s bathing and feeding residents, but she eventually quit because she felt she was not allowed to spend enough time with the patients.

When her task with each senior was done, she was almost always urged to move on.

"I wanted to sit and spend time with them. They always had stories to tell. There was no time," she says.

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Back in the hospital room, the sisters take turns pouring drops of water into Mr. Sedore's mouth, wiping his face with a warm cloth, rubbing his leg, kneading cream into his hands.

Today, 20 years later, Mrs. Vanderwerf is a pro at this type of work.

She has been helped hundreds of critically ill patients, some of whom have died in her arms.

She has listened to relatives of critically ill patients in their moments of grief. She makes fresh coffee for them, stands back, lets them know she is there.

Sometimes, unbeknownst to patients and their families, she cries afterward.

Ballroom dancing with Pete helps. So does playing euchre and enjoying family gatherings.

But she doesn't always have all the answers and doesn't always know what to do. If she has doubts about how to handle a particular situation, she phones a supervisor in palliative care at the hospital.

In 2002, she was honoured for her 15 years of work with the Newmarket Lioness

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Club, when she received the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal, an award for Canadian citizens who have made a significant contribution to other citizens, their community or country.

But she does not want to come off as some sort of elevated Mother Teresa type character, she says.

"I don't want to make it seem like I am up here," she says, lifting her hand.

There are others to consider.

"We are so blessed with good doctors and nurses that give such good guidance to help these patients. They make life so much easier for us."

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By 11 p.m. on that snowy day in February, Mr. Sedore is no longer breathing.

Ms Vanderwerf is not exactly sure what he died of, but she knows he had diabetes and had already had one of his legs amputated.

But with his death, a new passion was born within the two women.

As they walked hand-in-hand out of the room that day, they decided they would do this again.

And they did.

The sisters sat and cared for two more patients at the hospital before Ms Sherer died in September 1985.

But Mrs. Vanderwerf did not forget the pledge they made to each other that day to continue this work.

Every Friday, for about 18 years, she has visited the critically ill at the hospital, now called Southlake Regional Health Centre, often with another volunteer.

The 68-year-old has learned a few tricks over the years, such as using a straw to sprinkle a few drop of water in the mouth of a patient who cannot swallow.

She makes sure patients are comfortable and warm. She often stays quiet with

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them and has learned the importance of listening.

Sometimes, all she says is, "I hear you or I'm here for you or I will think of you in my prayers."

Often the patients don't or cannot respond.

They often can't thank her for her kindness but this matters little to Mrs. Vanderwerf.

"(It's enough) just to know I am there for them."

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### IN HER OWN WORDS

- 'I don't think he can handle what I am doing.'
- 'You have to be fast, Otherwise, they pull each other's hair.'
- 'I wanted to sit and spend time with them. They always had stories to tell. There was no time.'
- 'We are so blessed with good doctors and nurses that give such good guidance to help these patients. They make life so much easier for us.'