

# A loving effort for a last Christmas

BY ANNE SUTHERLAND, THE GAZETTE DECEMBER 14, 2012



BEDSIDE CHRISTMAS SHOPPING Volunteer Anita Mountjoy discusses gift options with palliative care patient David Lee at the Montreal General Hospital. Volunteers at the hospital's palliative care unit help dying patients select free gifts for their loved ones.

**Photograph by:** JOHN MAHONEY, THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

MONTREAL — Volunteers at the Montreal General Hospital palliative care unit are wearing elfin hats these days in addition to their regular halos.

They are helping dying patients, for whom this will be the last Christmas, select gifts for their loved ones. At no cost to the patient.

With carts laden with slippers, perfume, ties, scarves, photo albums, even a Princess Bride Barbie, the volunteers have been visiting the 16 rooms of terminal patients.

They help the patients choose something for niece Catherine, nephew Kenneth, something for the baby, and anyone else on the list. There are pet toys, too, as many of the patients have had to leave a cherished four-legged friend at home.

The volunteers then wrap and tag the chosen gifts and return them to the patients.

Everything — the gift items, the wrapping paper, the ribbon — is free, either donated or bought by the volunteer coordinator.

“Sometimes they ask us to hide the presents in the cupboard, and sometimes they are so excited they can’t wait till Christmas,” said Sandra Watson, bereavement program and volunteer coordinator.

“And, of course, the family members are so surprised.”

Volunteers at the General have been providing this service for 25 years. All of the items — the candles, the body lotions and photo albums, the cozy blankets and toys — are donated by friends of the hospital, staff members and in some cases, parties where guests are asked to bring a new item to add to the collection.

“It’s all been done word-of-mouth,” Watson said.

Just because a patient is preoccupied with dying does not mean he or she no longer has the energy or emotional need to celebrate special events such as Christmas, explains a two-page history on the gift-giving program.

Anita Mountjoy, a volunteer at the General for the last 12 years, is one of those helping to make this last Christmas special for bedridden patients.

On Thursday, she was helping David Lee, a youthful 83, pick out presents for his family.

“Here’s a lovely scarf, and how about some bath salts and perfumes for Catherine?” Mountjoy suggested to the former Merchant Marine in her soft-spoken and caring voice, personalizing the experience by remembering his family names.

“Anita is an exceptional volunteer, she can spend two hours with a patient choosing items, she just gives and gives,” Watson said.

Lee is something of an anomaly, a man who didn’t do his Christmas shopping on Dec. 24 at the corner drugstore like so many men of his generation.

“I was a pretty good shopper, I could choose the right colours and people often commented on my selections,” Lee said as he carefully examined each item brought to his bedside.

As for the choices Mountjoy was offering, Lee said the “selection was wonderful”.

Lee worked as a radio operator and spent his entire life in Point Saint-Charles.

“I won’t be going back there,” he said wistfully.

“Sure I’ll talk to you, I want to share the experience I’ve had here, it’s been wonderful,” Lee enthused of the palliative care unit.

“You want one word to describe this place? ‘Marvellous’ is not enough. How about ‘outstanding’?” he said.

Watson said volunteers start collecting gifts for next year right after Christmas. While they haven’t had any corporate donations so far, just individual gifts of items and cash to buy appropriate gifts, any and all help is welcome.

Lee summed up his feelings for the gift-giving service in one sentence.

“For anyone who becomes familiar with this program, I would say do your utmost.”

If you’d like to help, Watson can be reached at [sandra.watson@muhc.mcgill.ca](mailto:sandra.watson@muhc.mcgill.ca)

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