Lighthouse offers hope to those facing an abyss

New Cranbrook program supports those with recent dementia diagnosis and their caregivers

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When your spouse is diagnosed with dementia, all at once you’re facing an abyss — an abyss of questions to answer, support services to locate, paths forward together in life to find.

Lighthouse is a new service in Cranbrook offering love, compassion and hope to those who’ve been diagnosed with dementia like Alzheimer’s, and their partners.

Lighthouse is an extended outreach program under the auspices of Fellowship Baptist Church. It is open the community, and is non-denominational.

Pauline Swaren of Cranbrook was the impetus for the formation of Lighthouse earlier this year. She got thinking about the project after her own mother died, in 2000. And she herself was a nurse — an LPN — for most of her working life, working with dementia patients and geriatrics.

“Back in the ‘60s, it was called senility,” Swaren said. “And there was nothing — no support — for family and nursing staff. Times have changed, but there is still a long way to go.”

She approached Fellowship Baptist on the possibilities of hosting the program, and the church was on board right away. But Swaren stressed the non-denominational aspect of the program. “Anyone who needs it is welcome — even if you’re an atheist,” she said.

Lighthouse is volunteer-run, and one of the volunteers suggested the name. Lighthouse — a place of refuge and safety, to go when you’re in trouble.

“It’s something that’s daunting,” Swaren said of a dementia diagnosis. “There is still a stigma associated with it.”

Confusion, shock and fear accompany a dementia diagnosis.

“I know what it’s like as a family member,” Swaren said. “Even though I’ve worked with it [as a nurse], it gets very personal. Can you imagine, after 40 years of marriage? The first thing you ask yourself is ‘where do we go.’

“So this place is for the early stages.”

Lighthouse is a place for fellowship — for tea, coffee, discussion. It’s a place to share memories, a very important and rewarding part of the group sessions. Retrieving memories stimulate the brain.

“We sit down to talk, and get them comfortable,” Swaren added. “They love to tell their stories, where they were born, where they grew up, how they met each other.”

Volunteers take part in the sharing and story-telling.

“We change it up every time. From memory lane, to questions like how you felt last time you were here, to talk about how hard it is to get away from the ‘shadow.’

“The hour and a half is gone before you know it.”

The hour-and-a-half sessions help the diagnosed and their caregivers get a purchase on memories, and introduce new subjects. Guest speakers will also be part of the program, giving clients direction as their lives with the diagnosis progress. And people willing to bring in babies or therapy animals can be a big hit at the sessions, offering unconditional love and concern.

Lighthouse meets on the first and third Wednesdays of the month, from 10 a.m. – 11:30 a.m. Training sessions are offered for volunteers — there is a police check involved prior to becoming a volunteer, but after all, you’re working with vulnerable people, Swaren said.

Those with a diagnosis of dementia and their caregivers sign a consent form for insurance purposes prior to taking part.

Swaren mentioned that coming up on December 6, a gala Christmas party will be held at Fellowship for the program. “A gathering of friends old and new,” she said.

For more information on Lighthouse, call Pauline Swaren at 250-420-1705, or email gpswaren@telus.net.

“It’s here to stay,” she said. “As long as I have the health and we have the volunteers, it’s running.”

Fellowship Baptist is located at 2000 5th Street North in Cranbrook.