

## When every cent counts

### Brantford Expositor

Monday, November 12, 2012 7:32:11 EST PM

By [Vincent Ball](#)



It's the kind of conversation you have at the end of life.

Is there anything that needs to be said that hasn't been said? Is there anything you'd like to do that you haven't done?

"Yes," Julie Ellis said. "My mom is still not married and I want to be here for her."

That was the conversation Julie had with Dr. Bernadette McNeil at Stedman Community Hospice four years ago. She had just been moved to the hospice from Hamilton General Hospital to receive end of life care. Julie had a brain tumour and it was thought, at the time, that she had about two weeks to live.

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Walking into her daughter's room at Stedman Community Hospice, Diane Watkins had something important to discuss.

"We went in - we had already talked to my minister - Rev. Barrie Bain - and I said to Julie there's something really special that we're thinking about but we won't do it unless you're comfortable with it," Watkins recalled.

"As soon as I told her the idea, she said, 'Well, that's what Dr. McNeil and I had talked about. Oh, mom that's what I always wanted to do.'"

Watkins was planning to marry her beau, Clive, and she wanted her daughter to be her maid of honour.

Everybody, the medical staff, Bain, hospice staff, friends and family were on board and within 24 hours a wedding was planned for the back deck at the hospice.

Watkins had been staying with her daughter, sleeping in her room at night, to be with her as much as possible.

"That night, that was what we talked about,. That's all we talked about," Watkins said. "What we should say, we wrote a few words together, she was very coherent and very verbal at the time and she was so excited.

"She woke me up in the middle of the night and said, 'Mom, is it morning yet?' And I said, 'No, not yet.' And she said, 'But this is the morning you get married, right? You know I sometimes get things mixed up and I told her this was the day for sure."

They woke to a beautiful July day.

The sun was shining and flowers were in bloom when everyone gather on the back deck at the hospice for the ceremony.

Everyone pulled together, setting up the table in the hospice, arranging for flowers, friends brought food platters and another friend brought a bottle of champagne. Julie was moved from her room to the deck for the ceremony.

"The nurses had shampooed her hair and I was able to comb and braid it," Watkins said.

"She wore my pyjamas, the ones that say 'love' all over them. And a wedding quilt, which had been donated to the hospice, was put over the end of her bed.

"We got married on that deck with her husband, Dwayne, and her 10-month-old son Ben here."

Camillia Galezowski, a supportive care worker, brought music out to the deck.

"We had music, beautiful flowers and I guess you'd have to say we had a beautiful bittersweet celebration of life at the end of life," Watkins said.

Six weeks later and just two days before her 30th birthday, Julie died.

"After the ceremony she said, 'Mom, this is what I wanted'," Watkins said.

"It was amazing for me too because she wanted to be my maid of honour and that's what I wanted, too.

"Her motor skills weren't really all that great when we had the wedding and she really wanted to sign the marriage certificate as my maid of honour.

"So that was a very poignant moment for me because I held her hand. I knew her signature of course and when she was finished she said, 'It's not really as nice as mine.' But the most important thing is that she was my maid of honour, she was able to sign the register and I have that as a wonderful memory."

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Watkins has a couple of photo albums and the marriage certificate as lasting memories of her daughter.

She also has the knowledge that her daughter and the care she received at the hospice served as inspiration to Brian Almond, who has in turn, inspired a community.

"Brian was an incredible individual, he had a kind of special presence about him when he walked into a room. He just made you smile," Olga Consorti, the president and CEO of the St. Joseph's Lifecare Foundation, said.

"He had an experience with a wonderful family friend who had received care at the hospice and with that introduction to hospice he became so passionate about it.

"Before that experience, he didn't really know what the hospice was, why it existed or the types of services it provided."

That family friend was Julie Ellis.

"The hospice became a special place for him and he made it his mission to do something incredible to tell everyone about it," Consorti said. "He initiated fundraising activities, lobbied for the hospice, talked to people about it and held a dance last year that raised more than \$3,000.

"He didn't stop there."

Almond then came up with an idea to get everyone involved. He created cans that could be distributed throughout the community and could be used to collect loose change that would then be turned over to the hospice by December 2012.

"Sadly, Brian was killed in a tragic car accident in August and unfortunately he never got to see his idea come to fruition," Consorti said.

"But he certainly was aware of the fact that other charities are now continuing on his idea in partnership with the Brant Community Foundation."

Officials at the hospice have taken Almond's idea a step further and have initiated a new campaign to help raise funds for a new 10-bed hospice to be built on the grounds of St. Joseph's. It will named Hankinson House in honour of its biggest benefactors, the Lorne and Elsie Hankinson Charitable Foundation.

"We've determined that if every single household in Brantford contributed just \$32.38 that we would reach our (fundraising) goal overnight and we'd be able to put the shovel in the ground and start building our new hospice," Consorti said.

Almond understood that even small donations can make a big difference and that everyone can be a philanthropist.

"In the past we've had a lot of people say they'd be too embarrassed to give \$20 wondering what it would do when the goal is \$5 million," Consorti said. "We're really trying to change that notion and let people know that we really do appreciate every single penny."

"I think the very nature of the words philanthropy and philanthropist is that it's somewhat intimidating and people think that in order to be a philanthropist you have to make a significant gift. We want to challenge that - every cent really does count."



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