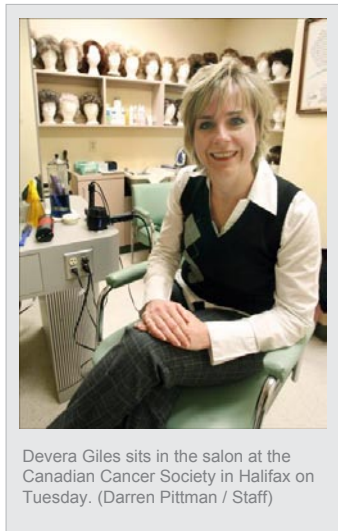


A fibre of comfort for those fighting cancer

Hairstylist volunteers her time, skills

By MICHELLE JONDREAU



Devera Giles sits in the salon at the Canadian Cancer Society in Halifax on Tuesday. (Darren Pittman / Staff)

The yellow daffodil is a symbol of hope and renewal for the Canadian Cancer Society and through its generous volunteer base, these feelings have blossomed time and time again.

One such volunteer is Devera Giles, 43, who donates her time two to three days a week on South Street at The Lodge That Gives, a welcoming environment for patients who come to Halifax for cancer treatment.

"It's very rewarding work," said Ms. Giles. "I get more out of it than they do."

Ms. Giles owns a salon on Brenton Street called UltraHair Solutions and has been working in the hair replacement industry for about 25 years. At the lodge, she does everything from washing hair to styling and trimming wigs for the people who do not feel well

enough to do it themselves. She even helps some patients apply makeup, which makes them feel more cheerful. All of this is done free of charge.

"When you're not feeling good, the best thing to do is to get your hair washed and put on a little bit of make-up," said Ms. Giles with a laugh.

Though she has never been diagnosed, Ms. Giles is no stranger to the devastating effects of cancer. Her grandmother died of breast cancer and her mother has been diagnosed with the same type. In the past, she has been treated for having precancerous cells in her body.

"I can relate to a certain degree," said Ms. Giles.

The hair stylist can relate enough to make the cancer patients she deals with very grateful for her contributions. One 41-year-old woman who was diagnosed with breast cancer last December remains very thankful.

"She's wonderful. She has that personality where she makes you feel good again," said the survivor, who didn't want to be named.

The woman, who has undergone surgery and been through two chemotherapy sessions, has visited Ms. Giles at her salon a few times now. Though the woman does not go to the lodge, Ms. Giles has helped her with everything from picking out a wig and matching it with her natural hair colour to trimming it to fit a style she liked.

"The first time I went to the salon I tried 10 wigs on," said the woman with a laugh.

With no cancer in her family tree, the news that she had breast cancer caught her off guard. She was grateful her visits to Ms. Giles in the salon remained private and said she was comforted by her personality.

As for her patients at the lodge, Ms. Giles said they all wait calmly for her to arrive. Once she gets started it's more like she is attending a hair salon party than dealing with people who are sick.

"It's like a home away from home," said Ms. Giles. "One fellow was so grateful for washing his hair he gave me \$20."

Mentoring on a small level is something else that comes along with her work as a volunteer. Most of all, she has become a good listener. She said sometimes patients will tell her things they would not be comfortable telling family members.

"If I can give a little bit of time, it really makes my day," said Ms. Giles.

Through another volunteer program called CancerConnection, which was implemented in Nova Scotia in 2001, patients have found a different way to cope with the illness. As the name suggests, CancerConnection brings together people who have been diagnosed with a survivor of a similar experience.

"My peer support volunteer gave me peace of mind. It was because of him that I was able to fall asleep many nights. I have a wonderful husband and very supportive family, but they haven't gone through this like my volunteer has," said an unidentified pancreatic cancer survivor in a written testimonial for the program.

According to Jill Laing, a communications manager with the Canadian Cancer Society, the countrywide free and confidential program has served a total of 193 clients in Nova Scotia in 2008 and 2009.

"It goes beyond clinical help," said Ms. Laing. "There's a lot of comfort knowing you're not alone."

'She's wonderful. She has that personality where she makes you feel good again.' ~ Breast cancer patient