

Victim Services Unit

Helping people deal with personal crises

By LISA RUTLEDGE
the Herald

Victim Services Unit, a division of Halton Regional Police, has spent about six years helping people like John, a 74-year-old Burlington man, who a year ago couldn't find a single reason to live.

Although John is not his real name, his crisis was very real. Last September, his wife of 47 years died when her heart gave out during an operation. Suppressing the grief, John tried to carry on doing the cooking and cleaning. Already retired for 10 years, his financial situation necessitated the sale of his Burlington home of 37 years. It took three weeks to sell.

Even though he took up residence in his brother's home, John was still unable to deal with his grief because family expectations and demands only created further anguish. He couldn't escape to the carpentry workshop, which was kept so busy in his Burlington home. Becoming increasingly worn by the stresses of losing a wife, a home and the privacy to deal with his losses, John slipped into depression.

Depths of depression

Although he couldn't bring himself to describe what it felt like not wanting to live to see the next day, John could only describe it as "the depths of depression."

Victim services senior co-ordinator, Patricia Smith, a former nurse, arrived at the hospital after John attempted to end his depression.

"I didn't have any friends. I didn't have any close family. It was just the two of us," John said, describing the factors which deepened his depression and referring to his late wife.

VSU Seniors Co-ordinator, Patricia Smith, was there at the hospital from the start, John said. "She was there telling me it wasn't the end of the world," he said. "She told me I had to start thinking about myself and take one step at a time" he said. "And we did."

Mrs. Smith, worked with John to help him pick up the scattered pieces and begin rebuilding his life. "I was at loose ends when she came," said John. After moving from his brother's home, John drifted from hotel to motel. "I had to have a place to hang my hat," he said adding that "Pat found me a place."

After finding John accommodation at a Burlington seniors complex, Mrs. Smith encouraged him to interact and build relationships with friends and family. Mrs. Smith believes once John established those contacts he was better able to deal with daily stresses. She had to help John accept that his wife of 47 years was gone.

Sitting in his senior's apartment, John and Mrs. Smith argued over who was responsible for putting his life back on track. He said Mrs. Smith was always behind him for moral support, but Mrs. Smith interrupted saying "you've done all the work."

No one to turn to

"But you gave me the motivation and I always knew I had you behind me to help," said John. "I consider you a very close friend," he told Mrs. Smith. "I felt as though I was absolutely on my own. I had no one to turn to. I probably wouldn't have put everything together if I didn't have



Halton Regional Police's Victim Services Unit workers struggle to help the victims of crisis.

anyone like you to help me think straight."

Mrs. Smith described her efforts to reestablish John's independence as putting the fundamental pieces of a puzzle together so that John could go on living. This security gave John a will to live and the ability to cope with daily problems, including such mundane tasks as getting a television repaired.

John insists the support of VSU finally made him realize he should remember his wife and not try to forget. John decided to furnish his new apartment with reminders of his wife including a wedding picture and a table he made specially for her. These objects had only brought painful memories for John, previously.

"At first I had some doubts," said John. "They were such constant reminders of my wife and I would get upset. It would churn up 47 years of memories. But I'm getting over it and they're a comfort now. I'm glad to see them."

John had never been to visit his

wife's grave because it was too painful for him to grieve. He realizes now that he was holding back the pain, hoping it would eventually subside.

On April 24, his wife's birthday, he bought a single rose and placed it on her graveside.

We all need someone

Mrs. Smith said John has made a tremendous effort to rebuild his life just a year after his wife died and months after losing the will to live. But she says instilling hope where there is none is all part of her job. "There isn't one of us on this earth who doesn't go through some turbulence in life," said Mrs. Smith. "We all need someone to lift us over the hump and let us down

gently."

The VSU team responds to crisis situations involving sudden death notification, suicide attempts, sex assaults and missing person calls, said unit co-ordinator Linda Ellison. The Burlington based unit is manned by civilians from every walk of life including, Mrs. Ellison.

The team provides ongoing support for as long as a victim requires help, she said, adding that it may take just a few visits to months before a victim is able to cope.

VSU is called to the scene by a police sergeant or officer as it occurs, explained Mrs. Ellison. When a suicide attempt is reported the police are required to notify family members, then VSU workers step in to help the family begin dealing with the crisis. The family will be distraught and there will be a lot of crying at the point of crisis but "if you don't get some sense of stability in them they won't be of any help to the victim," she said. The first step for the crisis team is to change the confusion into calm, she explained.

VSU workers have had to act as representatives for a woman at her husband's funeral because the woman was physically unable to leave her home. Mary, whose obesity hasn't allowed her to leave her apartment for almost two years, couldn't attend the funeral.

In late June of this year, Mary's husband suffered a heart attack. He was taken to Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital by ambulance. That was the last time she saw her husband.

Mary and her husband, who knew each other as children, had just celebrated their 39th wedding anniversary on June 16.

Not alone

VSU also attended the scene and Mrs. Smith remembers taking hold of Mary's hand letting Mary know she wasn't alone. Mrs. Smith followed Mary's husband to the hospital and kept Mary informed of his condition.

VSU workers have access to information which is even unavailable to family members.

Mrs. Smith also had to notify Mary's relatives and family doctor.

Mary's husband was later moved to St. Joseph Hospital in Toronto where he died several days later. But Mary only learned of his death through Mrs. Smith.

"I felt as though I were her messenger," said Mrs. Smith. "I felt a responsibility to let her know what was going on." Not only did VSU throw Mary an information line but they also threw her a lifeline, according to Mary.

Security disappeared

The security provided by her husband, who was by her side nearly every moment, disappeared as fast as the attendants could carry her husband to the ambulance. VSU workers had to replace that security with order and proceeded to bring together a network of nursing care and cleaning staff. Unit workers also became involved in financial matters helping Mary arrange for widow's pension.

"The little daily things have to be freed up so that a person has time to grieve," said Mrs. Smith.

Mary believes the advice and companionship given by VSU workers, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Ellison, made coping easier.

Mrs. Smith said she advises Mary to just take everything day by day. Set a task for each day and then that's it, she said adding that the rest of the day is free. If they believe there's another day tomorrow then they will manage, she continued.

This advice kept Mary from making rash decisions, Mrs. Smith said. People panic about what's going to happen and make hasty decisions which may not always be the right ones, she insists.

VSU workers periodically visit Mary now because they say she is progressing well despite her husband's death less than four months ago. They believe she is ready to take over her life and will gradually need VSU less and less.

Mary has even set a goal to leave the apartment in a few weeks time.

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