

LIVING

Club for the living

Evergreen Hospice support group helps clients facing death

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

Tom is a tall, tough cop near the end of the line.

Sitting on a sofa in the Friendship Room, a Scottish cane he's proud of hooked over an armrest, Tom is telling Hal Brooks about old times, the day Red Ryan came through Markham and gunned down two men.

It happened because Ryan stole a load of tires, he says. The gas station owner chased the gangster up to Vinegar Hill, and Ryan shot the man and his son while still on their car's runningboards, right after they turned off the ignition. "Ed died right away and his son, Jim, died about three or four years after," Tom recounts.

On Wednesdays, the Friendship Room in the basement of St. Andrew's United Church becomes "the club", as clients of Evergreen Hospice call it, the place where a few of them can get away from their illness and can enjoy a social life.

There are a lot of sick people around, so hospitals ought to recommend the club to them, Tom says. "It should be a bigger club than what it is."

An ex-cop, war vet and ex-plant protection officer for General Motors, Tom has leukemia and lung cancer. He wants to keep his mind active, but his eyesight's gone bad.

Tom likes talking to Brooks. He's an ex-cop, too, a retired RCMP officer from Markham, so he understands. And coming to the club is better than sitting in a chair at home.

"You gotta get out or you go bonkers," Tom says. "You get depressed sitting."

As a support group, the hospice day program is positive, not teary, says Sheila Kevins, the nurse who supervises it. "We don't focus on the illness."

Instead, the volunteers see a person with

needs, like Mary at the craft table, working with her hands. It's her fourth time here, she says, and each time she's done something. Last month, it was a Halloween ghost holding a basket of candy; the time before, a Thanksgiving centrepiece her grandchildren took home from the cottage.

"It's a chance to get out and meet some new people," she says.

Each week, volunteer Hazel Jackson comes up with a new craft idea, haunts the local White Rose and gets all parts ready for clients to put together. "I dream up these things and convince them that everybody can do it, and they do," she says.

Tom doesn't do the crafts. He'd rather talk about old-time crooks like the Boyd gang, the Jackson brothers, the town bums in the old Markham lockup.

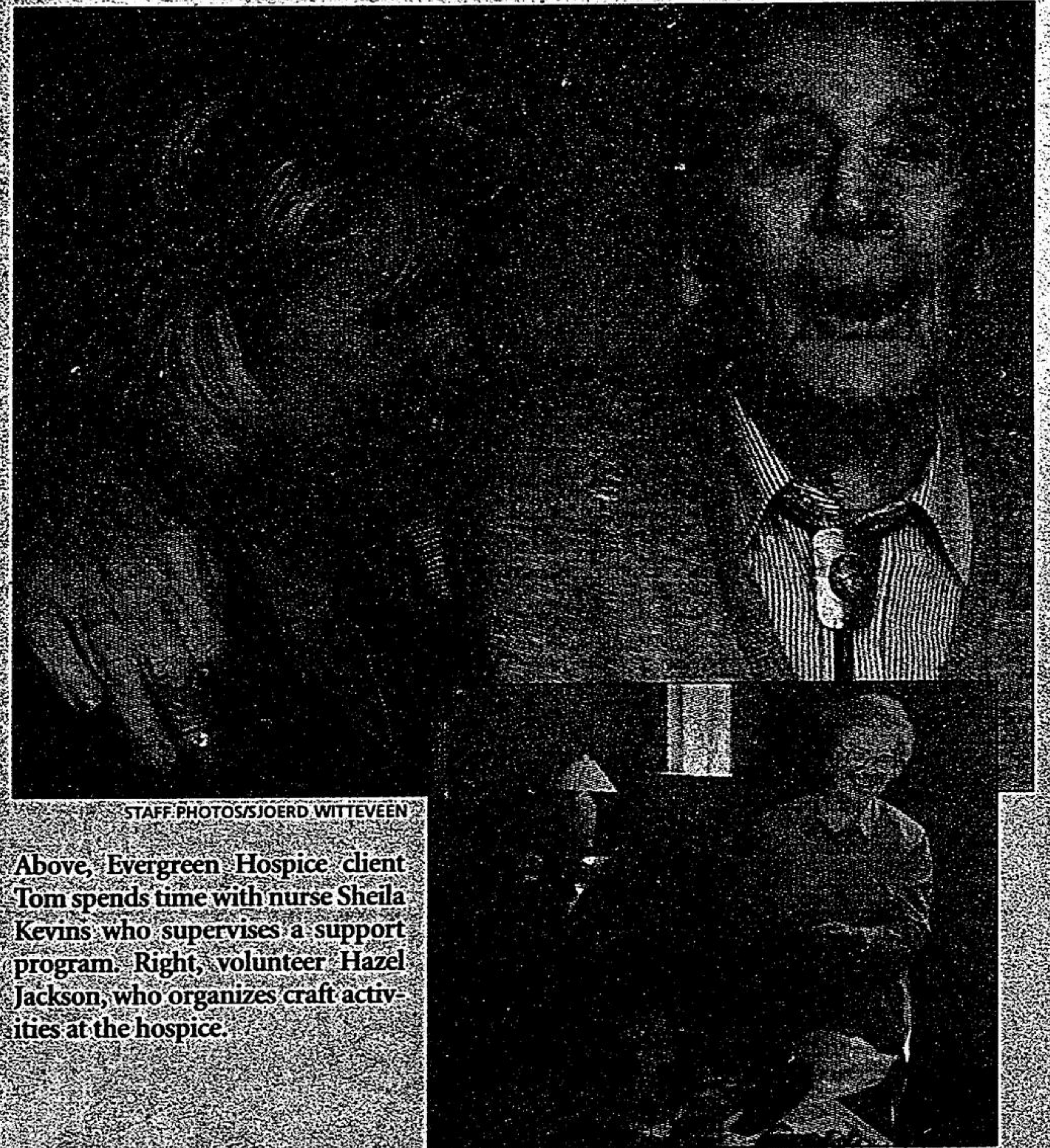
He'll tell you about the big bootleggers in Oshawa, or the time he caught "a bunch of the rough guys" there tampering with a car, then chased one when he fled and put a bullet in his leg. "I shot the back of his heel."

He remembers just who owned what on Markham's Main Street, old country songs, and the first poem he ever learned, at age six, in school.

"I'm lucky I can remember," Tom says. "Eighty-eight comin' up."

He'll be married 60 years this April. One of his grandkids is going to police college. "I've enjoyed life," he says firmly from the sofa. So has Reg, a hospice client known as Mac to everyone who worked with him. That includes members of the Group of Seven — Mac once travelled Canada coast to coast painting landscapes. He often went out painting with Lawren Harris and A.Y. Jackson, and ran lantern slides for Arthur Lismer's lectures on art.

"My only regret is that I can't do more than I'm doing," he says after a lunch of



STAFF PHOTOS/SJOERD WITTEVEN

Above, Evergreen Hospice client Tom spends time with nurse Sheila Kevins who supervises a support program. Right, volunteer Hazel Jackson, who organizes craft activities at the hospice.



Volunteer Marina Parry serves carrot soup for lunch.

tomato rice soup, ham and cheese sandwiches and the ever-present music of Haygood Hardy.

Portions are small, says volunteer Marina Parry, so the clients can have the satisfaction of finishing. "We don't ply them with a plate they'd finish at (age) 14."

Away from the usual setting, Parry believes, their appetites are encouraged, starting with coffee and muffins in the morning. "The smell pervades the church as they come through it and it helps the appetite."

Last month, the day program was named for Kathleen Marquette Mullin, who in 1944 joined the nursing staff of Our Lady of Mercy Hospital, now part of St. Joseph's Health Centre in Toronto.

It was the local place for incurables. "They always said when you went into that hospital you came out on a slab," says Don Ferguson, Mullin's son-in-law and past president of the hospice.

For a short ceremony in the Friendship Room, he has brought along her graduation photo, taken in 1916. In it, Mullin is standing by a pedestal, wearing a nurse's conical hat and white dress, holding a prayerbook.

"She was dedicated to ministering to

those who were staring death in the face," Ferguson says.

Mullin knew in her heart she couldn't cure, he adds, and she didn't have the equipment, as we have now, to keep her patients relatively pain-free. "She could only make their lives more joyous."

One patient, a dedicated stamp collector, lived inside an iron lung. For almost five years, Mullin brought him stamps from foreign lands.

Today, people are living longer with cancer, but their personal care has not kept up with technology. "They're living compromised lives," argues Esther Mitchell, director of Evergreen Hospice, called Hospice Markham Stouffville until last year.

The day program was started last year to help not just hospice clients but also their caregivers, she says. Often exhausted, caregivers can use the time each week to shop, cook or take a nap.

June Collins was given the task of organizing the program's first meals and volunteers. "I have just met some wonderful people, who have really left an imprint on my life, as families do," she says.

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