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York Region
CELEBRATION
of the Arts

Volunteer-run dental clinic
keeps promise to friend

BY PATRICK MANGION
Staff Writer

They say there is a silver lining in every cloud. For Aurora resident Jane Waites, the loss of a close friend inspired her to help others.

Waites' friend, Chris Bell, passed away two years ago from ALS or Lou Gehrig's disease, a rare degenerative nerve disorder causing a loss of muscle control.

"His bravery, his zest for life ... I was so impressed by him, it motivated me to start this process," Waites said.

"I thought, if he's in this situation, there must be others."

'People ask me, 'Isn't it depressing?'; but I feel so proud to be part of their lives (clients living with ALS). It's a very positive experience.'



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

Jane Waites and a team of volunteer dental hygienists run a clinic that helps patients with Lou Gehrig's disease care for their teeth. Here, Waites helps Barry Sproule of Richmond Hill.

Waites, a dental hygienist for the past 17 years, said people living with ALS are at higher risk of contracting bacterial pneumonia, so she created a dental hygiene outreach program, keeping a promise she made to Bell.

Waites said the volunteer-run clinic is a "health necessity" since the ALS Society has never dealt with oral hygiene for people living with the disease.

"It wasn't getting done with the clinics," Waites explained.

Waites was excited to learn last week that the dental outreach program she started won the Canadian Colgate

Community Health Award, a national award handed out annually for causes which promote health in the community.

Besides recognizing the efforts of hygienists involved in the program, Waites said the award will encourage more funding for supplies and help assure the longevity of the program.

Waites relies on 11 hygienists from the York Region Dental Hygienists Society who volunteer their time to do house-calls for ALS sufferers throughout the Greater Toronto Area, including York Region.

The outreach program currently has seven clients.

While Waites said that number may seem insignificant, she will continue as long as the need

exists. "Our volunteers are finding they're getting more out of it than they're putting in," Waites said.

"People ask me, 'Isn't it depressing?'; but I feel so proud to be part of their lives (clients living with ALS). It's a very positive experience."

It reminds Waites of a time with her late friend.

"He could only blink responses so he wrote a note on the computer saying (the outreach program) meant so much to him, that I followed through on a promise and it just meant so much."

Waites was also presented with the Community Service Award by the Ontario Dental Hygienists Association recently.

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