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CORRESPONDENT



He spoke. Who listened?

Keeping Memories of Dad Alive

On his first outing, **Chris Dillon** damaged his knee tendons. But he continues to participate in the annual Hong Kong Hike for Hospice. In this article, he explains why.

In early 2004, my father's cancer returned. The lung cancer that chemotherapy and surgery had driven into remission some years earlier had come back and spread rapidly to his brain. The prognosis was poor.

My mother, a strong woman and a qualified nurse, cared for my father at home as long as she could. Eventually, his deteriorating condition and need for round-the-clock care became too much to manage, and the palliative-care specialist recommended that dad move into a hospice. Our family reluctantly agreed, knowing it was the right decision. On July 17, 2004, dad entered the hospice at May Court in Ottawa, Canada.

Like all adults, I knew my parents would die one day. And like many expats, I hoped I could be with them when that time came. Fortunately, I was able to make several trips to Ottawa in 2004, including one shortly after dad was admitted to the May Court.

It was only after I had been in Canada for a few days – and had time to comprehend that my father was dying – that I began to notice the people and the organisation that were taking such good care of him.

Set in a low-rise complex in a leafy residential neighbourhood near the Rideau River, the hospice is a 20-minute walk from my parents' home in the Glebe. While the hospice served terminally ill people, it was different from any hospital I'd visited. Where hospitals are often busy, noisy places, the May Court was tranquil. Where hospitals are institutional, the May

Court was comfortable and homey. And where hospitals can be impersonal, the staff and volunteers at the May Court quickly recognized everyone in our large family.

Over the next week, I spent most of my time at the May Court. Between my mother, my siblings and their spouses and children, and my uncles, there was always someone with dad.

This was made easier by the hospice's facilities, which included several day rooms where we could spend time alone or with family and friends. There was a garden with a broad rolling lawn to keep children entertained. Kitchens were available, so we could eat when and what we wanted, and we were welcome to spend the night in a comfortable recliner next to dad's bed.

We never felt out of place or in the way at the May Court, and the medical technology never overshadowed the man. The hospice's calm atmosphere encouraged reflection, and made it easier for us to record our memories and impressions in the bedside journal that the hospice provided.

At about 4:00 pm on July 25, my father died, surrounded by his family. I later learned that the staff look-



Chris and Alex Dillon cross the finish line at Hike for Hospice 2007.

ing after dad had been scheduled for a shift change, but had stayed on because they knew that his death was imminent. That gesture embodied the spirit of the hospice movement.

The hospice at May Court greatly improved the quality of my father's final days and our time with him. By treating my father with dignity, compassion and respect, the hospice made a difficult process easier for each of us.

After the funeral, our family agreed that we needed to repay the kindness that we had been shown. Some of us participated in fund-raising events to support the hospice movement in Ottawa, while others made donations. When I returned to Hong Kong, I knew that I needed to get involved.

I contacted the Society for the Promotion of Hospice Care (<http://hospicecare.org.hk>), and met Janet Chui, the SPHC's then campaign manager, and Executive Director Kwan Kam Fan to see how I could contribute. That's where I learned about the Hike for Hospice, an annual fund-raising event that finances the society's activities. These include promoting the use of hospice care, providing bereavement support services, and developing and delivering end-of-life training programmes for caregivers.

The society is involved in many fund-raising activities, but the hike best fit my schedule and interests, so on the morning of January 16, 2005, I boarded the bus for Tai Lam Country Park. I enjoy walking, and a 16-kilometre stroll seemed like a pleasant way to spend a Sunday morning and raise some money for a worthwhile cause.

I was partially right – it was a relatively easy way to raise money. As is often the case, Hong Kong people, including several FCC members, were generous. But I was decidedly wrong about the ease of the hike: it may have only been 16 kilometres horizontally, but it was at least a further two kilometres vertically. Four hours and 52 minutes later, I crossed the finish line.



The opening ceremony of Hike For Hospice 2007, with Dr. C. H. Leong, chairman of the Elderly Commission, former Chief Secretary Anson Chan, and Jim Thompson, chairman of the Hike For Hospice Organising Committee.

I was exhausted, elated and, surprisingly, blister-free.

Having learned my lesson in 2005, I was ready to try again in 2006. With two friends, I signed up for the 16-kilometre route through Pat Sin Leng Country Park. When we reached Checkpoint #4 – at an elevation of 680 metres and a scant 6.8 kilometres from the finish line – we were astonished at how easy the hike had been. That changed quickly. A short distance into the downhill section of the route, my knees began to feel sore. As we continued, “sore” turned into decidedly painful, and soon inspired a range of heartfelt profanity. After four hours and 17 minutes, I crossed the finish line walking like I had been kneecapped.

The next day, I hobbled to a physiotherapist, who informed me that I had illiotibial band syndrome, a condition in which the tendon on the outside of the thigh, alongside the knee, becomes inflamed. After 90 minutes of stretching and twisting, I felt much better. I was also delighted to learn that I hadn't permanently damaged my knees. The physiotherapist

showed me a range of warm-up stretches, which I promptly forgot.

I also forgot the pain, because when the SPHC's new campaign manager, Rita Lau, emailed me asking if I'd join the 2007 hike, I immediately said yes. This time, however, I had a secret weapon: my nine-year-old son Alex. On February 4, the two of us completed the 12-kilometre course through the western portion of Pat Sin Leng Country Park in a very respectable three hours and 27 minutes. And courtesy of several warm-up walks and some stretching exercises that I found on the Internet, I didn't need to visit the physiotherapist afterwards.

And yes, I'll probably sign up again in 2008. That's because the hospice movement is universal – it provides comfort to everyone, without exception. Second, by specialising in palliative care, hospices make efficient use of people and resources. Third, there is nothing like a three-hour hike to turn a can of beer and a curry lunch into a feast. But most important, the Hike for Hospice for me is a very tangible way of keeping my father's memory alive. FCC