

McMaster and St. Joes grant dying wishes, and comfort comes cheap

Most dying wishes at St. Joes can be granted for under \$200, study finds

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Frieda Rowan suddenly ended up on life support and in the ICU at St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton last August. It was there that her family was introduced to the hospital and McMaster University's joint Three Wishes project. (Ingrid Thompson)

Frieda Rowan's favourite flowers were sunflowers.

Their glow captivated the 75-year-old, who was in good shape for her age, her daughter Ingrid Thompson says. She had no health problems – she wasn't even on any prescription drugs.

That's why it was so shocking when Frieda suddenly dropped to the floor, convulsing, at a Fortinos last August. She suffered a catastrophic brain aneurysm and ended up in the ICU at St. Joseph's Healthcare.

'It's true – the simple things in life are what matters the most.' - Research coordinator Marilyn Swinton

That's where her daughter was introduced to McMaster University and St. Joe's Three Wishes Project – courtesy of a huge vase of sunflowers.

The premise is just what it sounds like – since January 2013, researchers and clinicians have been granting wishes for patients in palliative or critical care. What they found is that most people's wishes could be granted for under \$200 — as they or their families requested small personal comforts or momentos, not grand or extravagant acts.

"She was blessed to be in that ICU," Thompson said. "I can't even really describe it."

The project is the brainchild of Deborah Cook, a professor at the Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine and a staff physician in St. Joe's ICU.

Honouring the dying

"We wanted to honour the lives of these people we were taking care of," Cook told CBC News. "It calls forth everybody's compassion."

In some cases it was the patients themselves who made the wishes, in others where they couldn't communicate, it was their families.

But in every case, the wishes managed to humanize the death process in a sterile hospital environment, and bring some measure of comfort to people in their most vulnerable moments, Cook says