


A South West grief support program helps people when most needed

Local News

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 Community Connector Program volunteer Jenny Chester offers immense support to Eaton widow Mary Reed.

Bunbury will host a State forum in August which will delve into an array of discussions surrounding caring, dying and grieving. It is the initiative of the South West Compassionate Communities Network and titled 'Let's Build a Compassionate and Connected WA'. The Mail will be running a series of stories in the lead up to the forum. This one focuses on the Connector Program.

When Mary Reed's husband of 50 years died earlier this year she was comforted by the fact that he died in his own home surrounded by loved ones, conversation and singing.

It was an experience which honoured her own beloved, cultural traditions. It was also a gift Mary and her family made possible out of their love for Malcolm with the support of palliative care services and a special "angel" called - Jenny Chester.

Jenny is a volunteer through the Community Connector Program, an initiative of the South West Compassionate Communities Network. The service is supported by the West Australian Country Health Service and links trained volunteers with families or individuals who are caring, dying or grieving.

Through the program, Jenny was given training early last year and then entered the life of Mary and her husband when they needed it most. Jenny is also an experienced therapist and former school chaplain.

"Jenny came in to our lives when we needed her most," Mrs Reed said.

"She listened, she helped us organise some legal matters and significantly for us, she engaged with us both in conversations around the dying process.

"As expected, these were difficult conversations and Jenny was amazingly strong, loving and mindful. She intuitively knew the words that would bring comfort and peace. Having community volunteers at its core makes this program genuine and now Jenny has become a friend who is continuing to support me through my grief."

grief.

South West Compassionate Communities Chair Samar Aoun is a Professor of Palliative Care Research through La Trobe University and the Perron Institute for Neurological and Translational Science.

Prof. Aoun's research underpins the Connector program and is being integrated into public health care policy and planning globally to foster more community-driven support systems.

"This program fills a vital gap for those who are dying, those who care for them and also up-skills the community to better support people through grief," Prof. Aoun said.

"Our predominantly Western culture can mean that people fall through the cracks and they don't always have the community support and connection they need at end of life and after a death.

"Only 10 per cent of people will have complex grief that requires professional intervention, the rest of the time our community can step in and offer that support.

"Through this program, we encourage people to put their hand up for support and foster this approach to community-based palliative care which also takes the pressure off the public health system.

"Connectors like Jenny are integral to this program, they go into homes, reduce social isolation and connect the family to the wider community who can help in a variety of ways. They might organise a load of firewood, walk the dog, fill out paperwork or just have a chat over a cup of tea."

Find out more at www.comcomnetworksw.com. Tickets for the August 7 forum can be purchased at the BREC.