

Helen Creamer made a difference in her community

By KEVIN LITTLE

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If you took the bus every morning into downtown Dartmouth, you might have noticed a short woman with wavy hair, a cat-like grin, hands ready to light a cigarette as soon as the doors let her out. Her name was Helen Creamer.

For the downtown community of Dartmouth, she was a fixture, whether at the Tim's on Portland Street, the steps outside the RBC building, or the front porch of Margaret House, Helen was sure to be noticed. She had a laugh that spilled out of her mouth, and it usually followed a naughty tease for one of her friends.

Helen died over the weekend, the victim of a severe heart attack. She leaves behind family and many, many friends. In the best sense of the word, Helen knew community and the community knew Helen.

For most of us, community means a place, a location where we can recall a landscape, residential homes and perhaps a few businesses that have remained for a number of years. For Helen, her community of downtown Dartmouth was defined by one word, people – people at Tim's, people on Portland Street, people at Margaret House, people at the Social Club.

I met Helen in 2008 at Margaret House. The executive director there, Karen Goudie, one of the most compassionate people I have ever met, sensed something was wrong with her most recognized volunteer. With some investigation, it became clear Helen was staying with family and friends, on chesterfields, but was always up early the next morning to volunteer. It took only a few phone calls to discover Helen had left her last apartment months ago, was receiving no benefits and had no belongings.

The gaps in our system of income support did not serve Helen well. At 65, she was no longer eligible for income assistance, but had no awareness of the federal benefits she was entitled to. These gaps, and the low levels of monetary assistance given to people living on the margins, point to a larger issue of social injustice, one that no amount of private concern can compensate for.

Karen Goudie and First Baptist Pastor Martin Zwicker co-ordinated an amazing effort to address all of Helen's needs. And once the community understood the need, they responded. It started with the staff and volunteers at Margaret House who offered unbelievable love and support. Helen's doctors went beyond the call of duty (thanks to Dr. Banks), the staff at the RBC on Portland Street

met all her unique banking needs, John Dicks arranged support for her housing needs, Circle of Care (Hector Muise and Diane West) provided furniture and clothing, the Mobile Outreach Street Health staff kept a close eye (special thanks to Monica), and the Harbour Glen Manor gave her the home she always wanted. From 2008 to 2011, Helen finally received the security and peace of mind that had eluded her for many years.

But this support was not one-sided. Helen was actively engaged in her community. As mentioned, Helen volunteered every day at Margaret House, Feeding Others of Dartmouth (for 11 years). She was also an active member of Among Friends Social Club on Portland Street. Bev Cadham, program co-ordinator, and Lori Higgins, social support worker for the club, remember Helen's passion for socializing, arts and crafts, and the game Trouble. Helen knew communities needed to have fun!

Helen also was involved at the Dartmouth Seniors' Centre, where she frequently helped navigate services and social activities for the people she met as she walked down Portland Street.

Helen will be missed by all, especially by the staff, volunteers and clients who gather every day at Margaret House.

It is also sad that it took so long to determine that Helen had these needs and that so many people in our communities who have the same needs often go unnoticed and passed by.

I write this piece for three reasons: 1) to inspire us all to notice people in the communities where we live and/or work, to ask them how they are, to inquire as to their needs with compassion, and most of all, to play an active part in our community; 2) to give thanks for the amazing community that is downtown Dartmouth; and 3) to lift up the way Helen contributed to that vibrant community.

When Helen's family met to discuss her funeral plans, they directed any donated funds to be given to Margaret House. It would appear Helen's generous spirit has been passed on to her children. Further, the potted daffodil plant offered by the family for the funeral will be planted in the House garden this spring.

For those wishing to pay tribute to Helen, there is a funeral service today at 1:30 p.m. at First Baptist Church, 100 Ochterloney St., Dartmouth. All are welcome.

Kevin Little is the community outreach facilitator with the Connections that WORK project of the Public Good Society of Dartmouth.