

The Exeter News-Letter.

Guardian angel helps a friend in need

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EXETER - When Marlene Wentworth found out she had a rare form of liver cancer in February, it was as though she'd been draped in an icy cloak of shock. But in the midst of this trying time, the Exeter resident was touched by a guardian angel who has warmed her spirits and filled her to the core with gratitude.

That guardian angel, Stratham resident Clara Mattheson, made it possible for Wentworth to receive a \$5,000 grant - funds that will help defray the astronomic medical expenses that have gone hand in hand with Wentworth's illness.



Mattheson holds other places in Wentworth's heart, too. She's also Wentworth's co-worker and dear friend. The two, who are both in their 50s, have worked together in the food and nutrition department at Exeter Hospital for 12 years.

"Marlene has always been there for us," Mattheson said of Wentworth's devotion to her co-workers.

And after all those years, Mattheson found a practical yet powerful way to return the gesture. Over the winter, she helped Wentworth apply for a grant from The Weber Foundation of Helping Hands, a nonprofit organization based in Melrose, Mass., that provides direct financial assistance to individuals and families facing life-threatening illnesses or other catastrophic situations.

Being the one who nominated Wentworth for the grant, Mattheson was dubbed Wentworth's "guardian angel" by the foundation. In March, when Mattheson delivered a check for \$5,000 to Wentworth and her husband, Randy, her title became all the more poignant.

Mattheson knows all too well the financial hardships that come with catastrophic illness. Her grandson, Elliot, was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder that required him to have a bone marrow transplant when he was not yet 2 years old.

"The little everyday expenses are enough to cause you stress, and when you have an illness yourself or in your family, you don't need any more stress," said Mattheson. "The grant money is just to help with the everyday nitty-gritty of catastrophic illness like copays or travel expenses."

When her grandson fell ill, it was Mattheson's husband who learned about the Weber Foundation when he was researching ways to help their grandson. Mattheson was more than impressed with the philosophy of the foundation.

"None of money (donated to the foundation) ... goes to any administrative costs at all," she said. "When they find someone with a need, they act immediately. There's no red tape. If you need something, their board of directors convene, and if (the money) is there, you get it."

Much to the Mattheson's delight, Elliot, who is almost 4 years old now, ended up receiving a grant from the foundation two years ago.

Fast forward to February 2004.

After Mattheson found out about Wentworth's illness, she was racking her brain for ways to try and help. Suddenly the answer appeared.

When an applicant receives a grant the foundation asks the family to come to their Spring Ball to receive it.

"We went that year, and the table favors were little porcelain hands," she said. "I'd brought mine home and against all odds I was dusting my living room (soon after finding out about Wentworth). I picked up those hands and thought, 'What in the world was I thinking in not thinking of the Weber foundation for Marlene?'" The rest is history; but for Wentworth, it's a vital piece of history.

After all, her cancer prevents her from working. At times, it's so debilitating she's admitted to the hospital for days at a time.

"The grant is helping me with expenses - ordinary living expenses," said Wentworth.

Her reaction to the support from her guardian angel?

"I thought that she was a true friend for wanting to help me out," said Wentworth. "I thought it was very nice that she cared enough to do that."

For Mattheson, who is a dietetic assistant at the hospital, the gesture seemed like second nature in light of all the times Wentworth - who works as a diet aide - had been there for her.

"I know that I called her sometime right around that time when she wasn't feeling good and asked her if she could come in, and she said, 'I don't feel very good myself but I'll come.' Now I realize that's why she didn't feel very good," said Mattheson. "Marlene was always the person we'd call on her day off and she'd come in."

Mattheson remembers another instance where Wentworth was there for her in spite of her illness, which she thought was merely a bad case of the flu at first.

"One weekend, we had a bad storm around Christmas, and when it's a blizzard category, sometimes, but not often, we spend the night when that happens," said Mattheson. "I called the office that afternoon and said I think I'll spend the night because we have to be there. There is no

other option if the patients have to eat, we have to be there. Marlene said she'd spend the night also - that if I did she would, too, so there'd be two of us there."

That current of camaraderie runs not only between Wentworth and Mattheson but throughout their entire department at the hospital. And Wentworth says she's felt their support throughout this trying time.

"They'll do anything for me - they come over, call or take me out to lunch," she said. "They've been very supportive, which is good because it makes me feel better."

Perhaps there's a profound truth to that. Wentworth, who used to receive chemotherapy treatments daily is now down to monthly treatments. Today, she says she's slowly getting better, thanks to support from co-workers, friends, family, The Weber Foundation and a guardian angel who was watching out for her.

For more information on The Weber Foundation, go to www.theweberfoundation.com.