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## Compassion and serenity

### **Marshall Ward, Marshall Arts:**

On the walls of Lisaard House, a beautiful, sunlit hospice in Cambridge, a quote reads: "Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away."

Reflecting on those words brought me great comfort while visiting my wife's aunt at Lisaard House, where she recently spent the final weeks of her life. She was 68.

Lisaard House opens its doors to people dying of cancer, providing 24-hour care, free of charge.

Their vision states: "People have a right to die with dignity, free from pain, surrounded by their loved ones in a setting of their choice."

That's what my wife's aunt did, and it's the reason we're eternally grateful to the professional staff and compassionate volunteers who provided comfort and peace in her final days.

"We don't want it to be a place of doom and gloom," Connie Dwyer, Lisaard House's executive director, told me this past week. "Yes, there are days that can be quite sad, but we want it to be a very meaningful time for the people and their families, so we try to keep it as upbeat as we can under the circumstances."

Founded by a Cambridge couple in 2000, Lisaard House has cared for more than 1,250 people. I was also interested to learn Lisaard is scheduled to open a new hospice in Kitchener this June on land leased from Conestoga College next to its Doon Campus. Whereas Lisaard House is for cancer patients, the new Innisfree House will offer comfort and care for patients with any palliative diagnosis.

"Innisfree House is going to be a little bigger, so there will be 10 beds as opposed to the six we have at Lisaard," development coordinator Janet Willard told me. "Like Lisaard, the intention is to keep that homey, comfortable feel."

I especially appreciated how caring the people at Lisaard were, welcoming us with kindness, coffee, fresh baked cookies and plush teddy bears for our young daughters.

"I have people say to me all the time, part of what they love about the house is the sound of pots and pans clanging, talking and laughter in the kitchen, and people walking through the halls, because it feels like home," said Willard.

Dwyer chimed in: "Similar to when somebody is born, this is a very special time in somebody's life. I think when somebody is leaving this life, it is also very personal and precious, and to be able to be a part of that is truly a privilege."

Looking through the windows at blue jays, cardinals and squirrels munching at the feeders just outside the room my wife's aunt stayed in, my family felt incredibly privileged as well, I told Willard.

"The focus here is on celebrating life and making moments matter," she said.

Like the sign on the wall says, life is not about the number of breaths we take, but the moments that take our breath away.

Though my family was saddened by the loss of a loved one, we were comforted by, and thankful for, many moments of breathtaking compassion and serenity at Lisaard House.

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