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Sad but smooth transition at Our Father's House

New director pays tribute to dedication of predecessor

By Paula J. Owen CORRESPONDENT



Judith Nest-Pasierb, the new executive director of Our Father's House, sits in her office last week. (T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN)

FITCHBURG — Even in her last days fighting lung cancer, former Our Father's House Executive Director Barbara R. Garneau worked to ensure the agency's missions continued uninterrupted

Ms. Garneau, who died on March 23 at age 58, was as much part of Our Father's House as the agency's mission. Incorporated in 1983, the agency opened its first emergency shelter on March

4, 1985, providing meals, shelter, housing search and advocacy services to homeless men and women. A few years later, Ms. Garneau was at the helm running things as executive director right up until her death.

The new executive director of Our Father's House, Judith Nest-Pasierb, said Ms. Garneau started making arrangements to train someone who would eventually replace her as soon as she was diagnosed with the terminal disease in January 2009.

"Barbara created the assistant executive director's position," said Ms. Nest-Pasierb.

"She had the foresight to know she wanted a smooth transition if she lost her fight with cancer."

Ms. Garneau, she said, thought she would have longer to train Ms. Nest-Pasierb than just eight months.

"She had such a positive outlook," she said.

"She truly believed she could fight it and beat the odds and statistics and live another five years. Her plans were to fight the disease and retire in five years."

Instead, Ms. Nest-Pasierb trained with Ms. Garneau from July 2009, when she took the assistant's position, through March.

"I saw the pain she went through in fighting the disease," said Ms. Nest-Pasierb. "She went through chemo the whole entire past year, but continued to work. She cut back her schedule and came into the office at least once a week working from her home office. It was incredible she could keep up the schedule."

While undergoing cancer treatment, Ms. Garneau limited her speaking and outside engagements — one of the reasons she hired Ms. Nest-Pasierb, she said.

"I was her eyes and ears in the community and reported back to her," she said.

The board of directors announced March 30 that Ms. Nest-Pasierb had been appointed the new executive director.

During Ms. Garneau's tenure, Our Father's House grew from just one emergency shelter at 55 Lunenburg St. to offering a transitional housing program for homeless men in recovery at 4 Leighton St.; opened the third floor of the Lunenburg Street facility as a transitional shelter for homeless women; took over management and operation of Elizabeth House, a transitional housing program for homeless women in recovery at 76 Mechanic St.; and on Sept. 8, 2006, assumed the management and operation of Transitions at Devens, a transitional housing program for homeless families at Devens. Additionally, Ms. Nest-Pasierb said, a \$2.4 million family shelter at Devens will open in May.

Jane T. Shattuck, Ms. Garneau's administrative assistant the last 10 years, said Ms. Garneau

dedicated her life to helping those in need, without homes and in recovery. She never married or had children, but filled her life with her work and many other loves.

“She was an artist, singer and had a horse of her own named Hudson and taught horseback riding,” said Mrs. Shattuck. “She loved animals and had dogs. She was also quite a sailor and a great golfer. She was multi-talented and anything she pursued she excelled in. She was a perfectionist.”

She said Ms. Garneau also had great relationships with local and state legislators.

“The head person of every organization can make it or break it,” said Mrs. Shattuck. “She was a taskmaster. Firm, but kind. She also worked here since the agency started — continuity makes all the difference in the world.”

Our Father’s House will dedicate this year’s 11th annual fundraising concert on April 24 at the Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School to Ms. Garneau, said Mrs. Shattuck.