

The gift of clarity during chaos

Russ. He's 58. Strong. Fit. Healthy. An avid skier and road cyclist. And then, just like every other Wednesday, Russ is at the Calgary airport waiting for his return flight to Vancouver. And out of the blue – boom. He collapses.

He doesn't faint. He collapses. Immediately comatose and unresponsive. He's rushed to Emergency. Tests show he has excessive bleeding in the brain, but no conclusive cause. He's intubated to help him breathe.

And that's when Karen Cook, his wife, starts getting the unexpected, life-changing calls. Tests, scans, and more tests follow. And when all the medical information is compiled and shared with the family, Karen knows there is no hope.

Advance Care Plan made

But Karen already had an incredible gift of love from her husband of nearly 33 years – a gift that enabled her to make a decision on his behalf without conflict or guilt: He had expressed his wishes to family and friends should something medically catastrophic happen. He had an advance care plan.

“He said, if anything catastrophic happens to me, don't keep me alive; don't keep me in the hospital. Take me to the mountains, to the ocean. Let me lie under the stars,” recalls Karen. “He made this very clear to us. We all knew that Russ wouldn't want to be in this condition.”

Strong, fit, healthy, yet out of the blue, Russ collapses. And his wife starts getting unexpected, life-changing phone calls.

“[Knowing his wishes] was an incredible gift to me that I didn't have to second guess what he wanted.

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Every family member had heard him talk about this. Many times. Friends too. Karen knew what she had to do to respect Russ' wishes.

"We needed to let him go. We couldn't keep him alive on machines because he was so clear about his wishes."

As hard as it was to say goodbye, and still deeply missing him, Karen says she has no regrets.

"It was an incredible gift to me that I didn't have to second guess what he wanted, or if I would be doing the right thing," she reflects. "In the chaos, the trauma, the overwhelming emotional turmoil, it created clarity when our lives were turned inside out."

Thanks to Russ' conversations making his wishes known, his family was able to focus on grieving rather than wondering if they had made the right decision.

And Russ' unexpected death was also a catalyst for each member of the family to talk about their wishes should something unexpected happen and they could not speak for themselves.

Karen's advice to others? "Don't be afraid to have the conversation [about your wishes]. It's an ongoing process, a conversation that may change over time.... Russ gave us the best gift. We knew exactly what to do at the hardest moment of our lives."

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