

*May 3-9 is National Hospice Palliative Care Week. Many people provide support to terminally ill patients and their families across rural Alberta. In part 2 of this feature, we take a look at their impact and how it's evolved.*

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Registered nurse Tanya Smith, who works as a palliative care resource nurse, worked closely with Sheri-Ann Madu and her family as her father and uncle both entered palliative care after cancer diagnosis. — Photo provided by Tanya Smith

Sheri-Ann Madu gets emotional when she recalls the support received from a Northern

Alberta palliative care nurse while managing her family members' care.

"[Tanya Smith] is next level amazing," she says.

Madu first encountered Smith, a palliative care resource nurse based in Grande Prairie with Assisted Living Alberta, when her uncle, Ken, was diagnosed with cancer.

Within a short time, Don, her father — her uncle's brother and caregiver — was also diagnosed with cancer. Madu took over care for both family members who hailed from Woking (a hamlet north of Grande Prairie) and asked Smith to oversee her father's palliative care.

The difficult road was made easier with Smith helping to navigate the healthcare system including pain management with the palliative care physician and other healthcare supports.

"I was always the caretaker, and my goodness, I'm telling you it's horrible and scary and lonely, and Tanya really helped dad and uncle Ken, and she helped me," she recalls.

Madu was used to stepping up as caretaker after losing several family members and close friends over the course of a decade. Before she met Smith, Madu tried to figure the system out on her own, but managing two palliative patients at the same time was especially hard.

"There were times where I was like, 'I don't know what to do,' and I would just phone [Smith], and she would be like, 'I'm going to call the doctor right now, and I'm going to talk about few things.'"

In the end, her father passed away before her uncle, who lived much longer than originally expected.

Madu believes Smith's caring nature and support helped prolong Ken's life.

"[If] he hadn't seen Tanya in a while, he would be like, 'have you talked to my girlfriend lately?' Yeah, he just loved her."