

# Bridging the 6-foot gap

A medical student's experience using stories to connect with palliative care patients during the coronavirus pandemic.

Holly Cherniwchan, BHSc



**I**t was during the pandemic that I had my first opportunity to meet with a patient approaching end of life. In September 2020, I enrolled in the UBC Legacy Project, where medical students partner with a person who has a life-limiting condition to support them in creating a project to leave with their loved ones. I had been reading about how the coronavirus complicated the grieving process for patients and their families; if there was some way I could help, I wanted to try. So there I was, an inexperienced 22-year-old medical student, donned in PPE, entering a hospice for the first time.

I felt overwhelmed in the unfamiliar building, introducing myself to many unknown, partially covered faces. The prior 6 months of my medical school experience consisted of virtual interactions with mostly healthy volunteers, and I could no longer rely on my nonverbal skills to develop rapport. It was as if my face protection formed a wall between me and everyone else.

Before I had time to question my ability to work on this intimate project with Sylvie,\*

*\*The patient's name in this reflection was changed for privacy reasons.*

*Ms Cherniwchan is a medical student at the University of British Columbia (class of 2023).*

*This article has been peer reviewed.*

I was in her room. Sylvie was a 52-year-old immigrant from England, in Canada with her husband, dying with a rare brain cancer.

The room was quiet, except for a ticking clock. As I looked at her from a 6-foot distance, there was a strange sense of isolation, despite being so close. I wondered how to get started, but without delay Sylvie was already sharing her stories. She used to be a journalist and couldn't wait to tell me about her life. I felt my anxiety melt away. I set up the iPad and got things going.

Over 2 short weeks, Sylvie and I connected over our shared interests in art, dogs, and traveling. We discussed sensitive topics, such as what she loves about her husband. We shared many laughs and many tears. Even though she never remembered my name, her face lit up each time I walked into her room. I hope she knew that, behind my mask, I was smiling too.

I didn't know Sylvie for long, yet we were able to create a meaningful video to share with her husband, who is grieving the loss of his soulmate much too prematurely. It was also a project to share with her family in England, who could not be there to share her last breaths because of the coronavirus.

**I wondered how to get started, but without delay Sylvie was already sharing her stories.**

Being a part of Sylvie's and her husband's lives is the most valuable experience I've yet to have as a medical student. Reflecting on my time with them, I came to realize what an honor it is to be trusted with someone's memories,

to put them together in a video to be a final send-off to their loved ones, and to join them in their last few days in the physical world.

When I last saw Sylvie, she told me that she felt lucky to have had our

time together. I couldn't help but feel that I was the lucky one. Sylvie taught me that, at a time when masks, goggles, gowns, and gloves dehumanize our interactions with each other, we can still connect through our stories. ■

#### Competing interests

None declared.

#### Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the patient's family for granting permission to share this story and the Victoria Hospice Society for welcoming this project into the facility. She would also like to thank Drs Philippa Hawley and Tara McCallan for their support during this project.