

## **“A Helpful Hand to Those During Their Greatest Time of Need”**

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by Eric Hagen, Staff writer  
[eric.hagen@ecm-inc.com](mailto:eric.hagen@ecm-inc.com)

When Pat McKeever was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s five years ago he and his wife Juanita McKeever moved from South Dakota to Anoka to be closer to their family.

Juanita McKeever found that she still needed help from others to provide 24/7 respite care for her husband, who is now 73 years old, and she found this help from a non-profit organization named Tamarisk, which provides companionship for children and adults with medical conditions.

The name “Tamarisk” comes from the Bible story of Abraham offering comfort to strangers crossing the desert. He gave them water and offered them rest under the shade of the Tamarisk tree.

Through Tamarisk, which is based out of Prairie Oak Community Church in Andover, the McKeever’s met their own angel named Tom Hakala.

Hakala, 67, meets with the McKeever’s once a week for about three hours. After he retired in 2002, he wanted to follow through on a commitment to himself to volunteer and after working for a couple of different groups, he eventually heard about Tamarisk.

“It’s a wonderful organization because it helps these people along their path in life,” he said. “We’ll all be there some day.”

Hakala meets with two other companions and said he adjusts the activities based on what his companion wants to do. Pat McKeever enjoys watching video recordings of the Scriptures and they also sit on the McKeever’s patio if the weather is nice. Hakala said another companion likes playing darts and another enjoys watching movies, golf and tennis.

“It’s my job to make them feel real comfortable and have them enjoy me being there,” he said.

Tamarisk was founded by Gretchen Hanson in 1993. She thought of the idea while caring for her father when he needed medical attention.

“It dawned on me that there needed to be more help for families taking care of someone in their homes and not just for medical reasons, but to give help to those caregivers,” Hanson said.

Juanita McKeever said what Hakala has done has been extremely helpful for her.

“I’m here 24/7,” she said. “It’s good for me to have a little break and have somebody here that I know is trustworthy and caring that will stay with Pat when I need to run errands or get out of the house for appointments.”

Tamarisk volunteers can work with medical hospice providers, home care agencies, counties and hospitals that a companion meets with, but Hanson said the mission of Tamarisk is not to provide medical care, but companionship whether it is visiting, preparing a meal or playing cards or games.

Hanson said Tamarisk catches people who falls through the cracks and might not qualify for another program, but she said Tamarisk will not meet all needs of an individual. It is an important piece of the puzzle in a county with a lot of other great services, she said.

“You would be surprised how many people fall through the cracks that don’t have any loved ones that live in the area, no friends or family, nothing or care-giver” said Rachel Leshovsky, executive director of Tamarisk.

Leshovsky said Tamarisk provides services for those going through hospice or palliative care, but an important piece of the program is the companionship. One woman wanted a volunteer to take her places, but was not interested in the companionship, so Leshovsky had to turn her down. Anoka County already provides this transportation service.

Leshovsky said all volunteer companions go through a background check and during their training sessions, which total 18 hours, she tells them that when they are with their companion, it is important to focus on making that person feel special and forget about what is going on in their own life for the two to four hours a week they meet with them. They should also stay out of the middle of any arguments between family members or friends.

Tamarisk gets its funding from grants, donations and fundraisers. The North Suburban Hospital District is the top donor, Leshovsky said. Bridge Link, an organization that connects local non-profits with area churches to provide volunteers is also a huge Tamarisk supporter, she said.

Tamarisk meetings are the second Monday of each month from 1:30-3:30 p.m. and from 6:30-8:30 p.m. To find out more information, call Leshovsky at 763-572-1950 or e-mail her at [rachel@tamarisk.org](mailto:rachel@tamarisk.org). The organization’s web site is [www.tamarisk.org](http://www.tamarisk.org).