

The Impact of Making Last Wishes in Life Come True Ms Iris Hoiting, Project Officer

When Kees Veldboer was working as an ambulance driver, he had to transport Mario, a patient who was under palliative care. Mario had been a shipper all his life and he conveyed that he would give anything to see the water and Rotterdam harbour one last time. This story and wish touched Kees' heart and so he drove with Mario to the Vlaardingen canal. A couple of days later, with help from a colleague, the people from a Rotterdam boat tour, and while borrowing an ambulance from his work, Kees was able to take Mario out on a boat again, and so fulfilled the shippers' last wishes. This chance encounter inspired Kees, and led him to create the charity foundation *Stichting Ambulance Wens* (Ambulance Wish Organization), in the Netherlands.

Over the past years, the impact of one touching story like Mario's has led to many more wishes being realized by *Stichting Ambulance Wens*. Currently, with help from 230 medically trained volunteers and six specially designed ambulances, 7295 patient's wishes have come true. All wishes are fulfilled for free, and there are no waiting lists. The foundation relies heavily on donations. Pictures of memorable outings are available on the foundation's website, as are some heart-warming accompanying stories from patients and family members.

For example, Ingrid, who suffers from incurable brain cancer, was driven to Austria with her family, to have one last Holiday together at their favorite holiday destination.



<http://www.ambulancewens.nl/wensen/2015/10/456-nog-1-keer-naar-ingrids-favoriete-fugen-zillertal-oostenrijk->

Wietse, below, has been battling cancer for over 50 years. As his condition has been deteriorating, and he is a great art lover and painter himself, his last wish was to visit the Rijksmuseum one last time.



<http://www.ambulancewens.nl/wensen/2015/10/460-dank-jullie-wel-voor-een-fantastische-dag>

Then there was Constant, who was terminally ill but with the help of *Stichting Ambulance Wens* he was able to attend his daughter's wedding, 2 months before his passing away.



<http://www.ambulancewens.nl/wensen/2015/11/469-de-dag-werd-mooier-dan-ooit->

Intrigued by all the stories, I contacted Kees Veldboer in February 2016. I asked him what, in his experience, the impact on the patients and their families is when their last wishes are fulfilled.

Kees replied:

“We always see the patient so happy when their wish is being fulfilled. As they have often been laying in their bed for a number of weeks, when we suddenly take them outside, this really brightens them up! People are going through a process of loss and bereavement, but when we come in we make jokes and act normal around them, which is often an entirely different approach than they experience from their usual visitors. Patients sometimes have to get used to this a bit, but soon enough they greatly appreciate it that we treat them as “normal” and not as some pitiful person. You can tell that this really brightens up their spirits.”

To illustrate this, Kees referred to the pictures on the website, like the ones shown above, in which one can see many smiling patients. He continued to explain:

“the family members enjoy it [the wish fulfilment] as they see their loved ones having such a good time. They are often very thankful, especially after their loved one has passed away, that they were still able to experience this event together. There are many families who have thanked us afterwards and stated that we [the volunteers] are a type of medicine!”

As the volunteers are intimately involved with these ‘wish fulfilment missions’, I asked Kees what impact all of this has on members of his organization. He answered:

“For us as volunteers it gives us strength and energy, because we experience that in a relatively simple way, we can mean so much for seriously ill people. We get so much thankfulness from the people, which makes you stronger every time. Besides that, it teaches you to not postpone things. If you want to do things you should do it while you have the chance, because ‘later’ may not exist!!!! We get so many [wishes from] people between 30 and 50 years old, people who should have a whole life ahead of them but who suddenly, due to their illness, can’t do anything anymore. In situations like that we are very happy that we, as healthy people, can help them out.”

Finally, given his wealth of experience in palliative care, I asked Kees if he has any advice for others, who work with palliative patients. Kees replied:

“Be sure to let people maintain their dignity and don’t decide for a patient what they can or can’t do. If a terminally ill patients wants to go to the ocean one last time, let them, make this



happen without thinking that he/she is too ill and perhaps could die in the midst of it. What is more beautiful than dying in a place where you would really like to be?"

He continued:

"Make sure that the patient trusts you and that he/she can share anything with you and that they can share their story, for often this is not possible with their family members!"

Kees also suggests that it is ok to disagree with the patient at times: *"You don't always have to agree with them, but make sure to explain thoroughly why you have a different opinion."*

In our email conversation, Kees told me that branches of the *Ambulance Wens* organization have now also been established in Belgium, Germany, Sweden and Israel, and he is currently working hard to start-up his initiative in the UK. He even mentioned that, someday, he would love to bring this type of project also to places like Hong Kong!