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Caring for caregivers at the Monastère des Augustines

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The monastery's renovations combine old and new, offering simple comfort to tourists and caregivers alike.
Photo: Sarah Barclay

There are arguably three distinct groups in Quebec City who already know about the Monastère des Augustines' museum, hotel, restaurant, and wellness centre: the trendsetters, history buffs, and most importantly, caregivers and health professionals who rely on the monastery as a place of shelter and relief.

Watching guests discuss breathing workshops while a tour group photographs the sisters' traditional habits, all in the shadow of a bustling hospital in the Old City, one may stop to contemplate what may seem like the most convoluted business plan ever. However, listening to Marie Rübsteck, general manager of the Fiducie du patrimoine culturel des Augustines (cultural heritage trust), one quickly sees how it all fits together to benefit a greater cause.

"We have a non-profit organization that's called the Monastère des Augustines that operates the whole place," explains Rübsteck. "Then we have the Fiducie du patrimoine culturel des Augustines, which is a trust, and also the owner of the monastery and the guardian of the intentions of the Augustinian sisters. Our mission is to welcome caretakers here. In other words, we take care of those who take care of others."

Although the Monastère has yet to make it into the black since it opened a year ago, all profits from commercial operation of the monastery will go towards funding the free and low-cost services provided to personal caregivers, people accompanying patients receiving treatment at the Hotel-Dieu and other hospitals, and health and social services professionals.

Rübsteck elaborates on the monastery's commitment: "Personal caregivers can stay from two to four nights here and all the meals are included. [While they are here, the caregivers] are being replaced; someone takes care of the person at home for them so they can disconnect completely. We also offer respite and help and a place to go and talk for professional caregivers: nurses, social workers, and such. We create circles for them so they can come and share and talk with each other, and so on."

For those who have travelled from out of town with someone undergoing treatment at the hospital, Rübsteck points out that the monastery offers rooms for only \$30 a night, a price that is in itself a form of respite: "They may just stay for a couple days, but sometimes it can be several weeks. And sometimes people don't know ahead of time; there are complications and they need to stay longer, so that's part of what we do."

Yet there is still a very real cost to caring for caregivers, which means that the trust has many fundraising projects on the go in order to reach their goal this year of \$400,000. In addition to corporate donors, the monastery has a circle of "ambassadors," women, mostly from the business community, who donate money every year, but also devote time to promoting the monastery in their networks. The circle of women was an initiative of trustee Geneviève Marcon, who was inspired by the Duchess of Aiguillon, the very first benefactor who made it possible for the Augustinian sisters to come here from France in 1639.

This summer, the monastery is also holding a lottery: Only 500 tickets, each costing \$100 are available, and there will two grand prizes of a three-night stay for two people at the Monastère hotel, as well as an exclusive gift basket. In addition to this, each ticket includes five admissions to the museum and five vouchers for daily activities such as yoga and meditation. Anyone interested in supporting the Augustinians can purchase a ticket at monastery's reception desk or contact Nathalie Arsenault at info@augustines.ca or 418 780-4800 ext. 500. The draw will take place on September 1, 2016.

It's early days yet, and so Marie Rübsteck, former executive director of the Morrin Centre, has not had the chance to develop partnerships based on her connections in the English community. However, as she points out, she is eager to do so and the monastery's bilingual staff is ready to accommodate English-speaking guests and caregivers at any time. For more information about the trust or the monastery, visit www.augustines.ca