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Jim Stingl | In My Opinion

E-mai

Dying social activist prepares cause to go on without her



Tom Lynr

Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart, an activist in central-city teen development, recently learned she has six months to live.

Posted: Dec. 12, 2009

Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart is 51 years old and she's dying. She accepts that she has incurable cancer and, true to her nature, is looking on the bright side.

Much of her professional life has been devoted to turning teenagers into community leaders. She's hoping that work will continue, and she's not leaving it to chance.

In the time she has left, she is training others to carry on her programs. And Lisa's Legacy Fund has been created to cover the costs.

"No one gets out of this world alive," Lisa told me with a hearty laugh. "All things being said, this is not a terrible way to die. I have a committee of people working to help my dream come true. Like, who gets that? That's an amazing blessing. How can I feel unlucky or cheated?"

Her father died of a heart attack at 53. Gone, just like that. Her mother died this year after a long battle with cancer.

"We never knew when it was time to say goodbye. It seemed like she had so much time," Lisa said. "I'm dying at the perfect rate. It's slow enough so I have time to write all my notes to all my family and friends, and fast enough so I know it's urgent."

Lisa talked about imminent death only because I asked her about it. What she really wanted to discuss was Tomorrow's Present, the youth leadership ministry she ran through Milwaukee's House of Peace and the Leadership Center at Cardinal Stritch University, where Lisa earned her doctorate.

The mission is nothing short of "empowering youth and adults to transform their communities through learning, reflection, leadership and service."

The core programs have names like Hope is Something You Do, and Pebbles of Peace Outweighing Boulders of Violence. High school and middle school students are nurtured and taught and, most importantly, listened to. Confident young leaders emerge, and they help other teens to resolve conflict, reject violence, improve their neighborhoods and schools, and respect people of different faiths.

Eduardo Diaz, now 25 and a teacher at a Catholic school in Chicago, went through Lisa's program, and he remembers the passion and caring she brought to it.

"I don't think I realized it when I was working with her as a teen, but it was - and is - a tremendous blessing to know her," he said.

Marie Britt-Sharpe is a parent-volunteer who worked with Lisa. Her son is a teen leader grad.

"She has, as it is said, kept it simple by developing opportunities for youth to express their concerns and dreams for their future," she said. "We have been blessed to have had Dr. Calderone-Stewart here in Milwaukee doing great things."

Lisa grew up in New Jersey and came to Wisconsin in 1997 to take a job in youth ministry at the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. She shifted the Tomorrow's Present programs over to House of Peace in 2005, though there wasn't enough money there to put her on the payroll.

"So I continued to fund it myself with grants, individual donations, my own workshops, and books I write and articles I write, and speaking engagements. This year was so tight that we made it by less than a thousand dollars," she said.

It wasn't unusual for Lisa to work 12- to 16-hour days, even as she reduced her own salary to keep the program in the black. She found time to swim a mile several times a week.

"Then I hit a brick wall," she said.

In February, she began to feel woozy after swimming. In March at a speaking appearance in Canada, she was faint and couldn't read her notes.

In June she learned she had lymphoma, "not a bad cancer to have," she said. But later in the summer there was more dire news. Doctors discovered bile duct cancer in her liver.

That cancer was aggressive and hard to treat. Liquid chemo was injected directly into the tumor, but she didn't tolerate it well. For weeks she was in pain so severe she could hardly move. Even worse was that the treatment didn't seem to faze the cancer.

Lisa knew she couldn't repeat the procedure every six weeks as recommended. Untreated, she had perhaps six months to live, she was told.

You're so young, people say to her. Not really, she responds.

"Think of all the teenagers who get shot down. We should be crying for them. They should be as lucky as I am to live half a century."

Lisa has two grown sons and three grandchildren. As youthful as she looks, she tires quickly and can work only a couple hours a day. On the day I visited her apartment on Milwaukee's southwest side, a hospice nurse was there. Lisa used a walker to get around. A recliner is set up for her at Tomorrow's Present events.

Lisa is in regular contact with a handful of people who are trying to learn everything they can about the workings of her leadership programs. One of them, Sean Lansing, who trains youth ministry professionals, said he marvels at how matter-of-fact Lisa is about the task at hand.

"She's focused. She just does not see anything remarkable or intriguing about what she's doing. She's like, how else would I do it?" he said.

The Legacy Fund is accepting donations. Checks should be made payable to Legacy Fund for Tomorrow's Present and sent to Peter Holbrook, Leadership Center at Cardinal Stritch, 6801 N. Yates Road No. 438, Milwaukee, WI 53217.

Lisa also is busy giving away her possessions. And she's telling the people closest to her what she loves about them. Don't wait until you're dying to do that, she advises.

She does her best under the circumstances. No one is responsible for fixing everything wrong in the world, Lisa said.

"I just have to take my little corner and do what I can."

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