

# Finding empowerment in work and in death

After cancer diagnosis,  
Calderone-Stewart kept  
focus on youth ministry

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*As you already know, I'm 'Dying to Know You Better' . . . .*

That's what Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart liked to say, and she meant it in every sense of the word. It was also what she called her online journal.

Calderone-Stewart was diagnosed with lymphoma in June 2009. Then she was diagnosed with bile duct cancer that August.

*Every month, I say, 'I can't imagine I'll be here another month!' and then everyone tells me, 'You say that every month!' and I respond, 'Yes, but one of these months, I'm going to be right!'*

Now she is finally right.

Calderone-Stewart died Friday in hospice care in Wauwatosa. She was 53.



JOURNAL SENTINEL FILES

Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart, shown in 2009 when she was told she had six months to live, was active in central city teen leadership at House of Peace.

She was sweetly philosophical about even that, as she wrote early this year in her journal at *www*

Please see **CALDERONE-STEWART, 2B**

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**CALDERONE-STEWART**

**She nurtured teenagers**

*.caringbridge.org/visit/lisacalderone.*

*I am 53 today. My dad died at age 53. Jim Henson also died at age 53 ...*

*I imagine I will as well ... and I will be in excellent company!*

The Milwaukee chapter of her life began in 1997. She joined the Archdiocese of Milwaukee as a leader of Catholic Youth Ministries, involved in mentoring and youth leadership training. She also created Tomorrow's Present, a youth leadership ministry.

When budget problems meant the program was going to be cut, Calderone-Stewart decided to move it to the House of Peace. There was a big catch — no salary — unless she could raise the money to run it, as she explained in her journal.

*It was very Franciscan. ... I would have to beg for a living.*

*I took a leap of faith. And here I am. A Jesuit soul in a Franciscan ministry center. Or maybe ... I've had a Franciscan soul all along.*

**Focused on empowerment**

She earned her doctorate in education at Cardinal Stritch University. The university's Leadership Center now runs Tomorrow's Present in partnership with the House of Peace.

Always, her work was about empowering people, young and old, to change their lives — and the world — through learning, reflection, leadership and service.

Key parts of the program have names like "Hope Is Something You Do" and "Pebbles of Peace Outweighing Boulders of Violence."

"She believed that every young person could reach their full potential if they were given the right amount of love, the right amount of support and someone believed in them," said Sean Lansing, director of Youth Leadership Development and Tomorrow's Present at Cardinal Stritch University. "That was her legacy and impact."

Others agreed.

"She devoted her whole life to working and fighting for social justice," said Peter Holbrook, executive director of the Leadership Center. "Lisa taught me to dream big, be daring and that hope really meant having outrageous expectations and understanding, no matter what happens, everything would work



COURTESY OF LISA-MARIE CALDERONE-STEWART

Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart poses with her sons, Ralph and Michael, who came into her life the year after their birth mother died.

out."

"Are we changing the world?" she asked in a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel story in 2006. "We are changing it, pebble by pebble, piece by piece."

She loved to write. That included lots of professional work on youth leadership and ministry. More recently, she self-published a novel about a character named Nellie Massa, inspired by her own experiences at the House of Peace. All profits go to Tomorrow's Present. (Information about the novel is available at: [www.lulu.com/product/paperback/made-to-write/13399623](http://www.lulu.com/product/paperback/made-to-write/13399623).)

She also wrote about the people who were important to her, including sons Michael and Ralph Stewart, who came into her life the year after their birth mother died.

She even wrote about life as a dying person.

"When you know you are dying, it's really just a new way of living," she said in a column for the U.S. Catholic magazine.

In her personal life, she loved swimming, finding peace and strength in long laps even as the cancer ravaged her body. She was inspired by Kermit the Frog, Snoopy and the Cat in the Hat — and by real-life heroes Jim Henson, Charles Schulz and Dr. Seuss.

Calderone-Stewart talked about what her years in Milwaukee meant to her, calling it a marvelous place to live, to work and to pray. She also said it was where she began to drink beer, discovering that she loved the dark stuff.

She loved watching "Monk" epi-

sodes. Calderone-Stewart once admitted to a hospice nurse that she was experiencing more pain after a marathon "Monk" fest. It seemed she had laughed too much. And, yes, she said, she would do it again.

She grew up in Mountainside, N.J., and later worked other jobs elsewhere, including in Grand Island, Neb.; Saginaw, Mich.; Montgomery, Ala.; and Chestnut Hill, Mass.

**Received youth ministry award**

Late last year, Calderone-Stewart was honored with the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry's Award in the Gospel Values of Justice and Peace.

"No one gets out of this world alive," she told Jim Stigl, columnist for the Journal Sentinel, early in her illness. "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?"

In addition to her sons, survivors include brothers Joe, David and Steven Calderone, and grandchildren.

Details of a service for Calderone-Stewart are not yet final.

Memorials are suggested to Cardinal Stritch University-Tomorrow's Present, 1037 W. McKinley Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53205.

**Practical and positive advice**

Read more of Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart's words to live by at [jsonline.com/obituaries](http://jsonline.com/obituaries).