

Full of faith, optimism

Lisa Calderone-Stewart dying the way she lived

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Few challenges get the best of Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart. Take for example the motley group of swimmers that she coached to an undefeated championship as their swim coach some 30 years ago.

Or the time she was offered a job with the House of Peace in 2005, with the caveat that she'd need to raise \$50,000 in grants to fund the program and her salary. By year's end, she had written enough grants to create a surplus \$20,000.

Without a publisher, she's about to publish her first novel to raise money for her life's passion – working with teens.

The latest challenge life has thrown at her is most certainly Calderone-Stewart's toughest. She's living with a terminal illness, expected to take her life within months. But in spite of this unexpectedly shortened time on earth, Calderone-Stewart remains upbeat, sees the blessings in her journey and is determined to leave behind the legacy of a leadership program, *Tomorrow's Present*, which has already benefited hundreds of teens.

"God invented the world so that we would live on earth for a while, leave earth and go to heaven and if we really believe there is a heaven – and I do – then we are living according to God's plan. Sure, it would

be a lot nicer to have 20 more years ... I think of what I would do with *Tomorrow's Present*, but I don't get to choose," said Calderone-Stewart in an interview with your Catholic Herald in December.

'No beef with God'

She described herself as lucky to travel a known journey to death, rather than being unprepared for the unexpected.

"The best part of knowing that you are dying – and that's why I have no beef with God – is it's so freeing. Everyone has no expectations. The pressure is off. It's completely stress-free. I get to go think of all the people I love and tell them why," she said, explaining she's slowly given away her meaningful belongings to family – including sons, Michael and Ralph, their wives and three grandsons – and friends and has packaged items for her 12-year-old niece to be given to her when she graduates.

Calderone-Stewart, 52, grew up in New Jersey in an Italian, Catholic family. The only girl with three brothers, she said faith was a central part of their lives.

"Since my uncle was a priest (a Jesuit ministering in the Philippines), religion was a big deal in our house," she said, explaining she attended Holy Cross College for her undergraduate and graduate degrees and got her first job teaching kindergarten in Alabama.

From swim team coach to youth ministry career

While there, the former Holy Cross swimmer was recruited to coach a swim team of children ages 6 to 18. The team historically struggled, losing as many meets as it won, but Calderone-Stewart devised a system that relied on the leadership of the older children to guide the younger ones. The buddy system that developed was wildly successful, leading to a championship season. Taking note of the success Calderone-Stewart enjoyed with the team, some of the teachers on the swim team invited her to work with the youth at the Catholic parish.

That was her introduction to youth ministry and led to a career in the emerging field. While volunteering at the Alabama parish, she learned that paid positions in the field existed "up north."

So north she went, finding a diocesan position in Nebraska and parish work in Saginaw, Mich., where she met John Norris, future superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, who eventually led Calderone-Stewart to the Milwaukee Archdiocese.

Along the way, after finding little written material on youth ministry, she authored 20 books on the subject, as well as many articles and chapters in other books, including the "Catholic Youth Bible," and "Breakthrough Bible."



Lisa Marie Calderone-Stewart, surrounded by the House of Peace Teen Leaders, sits holding a quilt made for her by the teens. The Leadership Center of Cardinal Stritch University has begun "The Legacy Fund

for *Tomorrow's Present*: A Lasting Tribute to the work of Dr. Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart," to ensure that her work with teens will continue into the future. (Submitted photo courtesy Lisa Marie Calderone-Stewart)

She became associate director for early adolescent ministry in 1997, a radical move at the time for the archdiocese, said Calderone-Stewart explaining that few dioceses had full-time positions in youth ministry.

Tomorrow's Present born

Two years later, Tomorrow's Present was born, the result of her doctoral project on teenagers as present and future leaders. But shortly after, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee ran into financial problems and cutbacks were imminent.

Calderone-Stewart's position was not eliminated, but her job description changed.

"I did not lose my job; I lost my job description," she said, explaining that with the cutbacks, Tomorrow's Present would be eliminated.

Determined not to let that happen, she found a home for the project with the House of Peace, a Capuchin ministry center in the central city.

"They had a teen leader program, and some of their young people had been in my research study. They were already involved in Tomorrow's Present, so I knew most of the staff there already," she explained in a posting on her blog. "It sounded like a great idea. But there was one catch. And it was very Franciscan. I would have to beg for a living."

Since the House of Peace couldn't afford to pay her, she'd have to come up with the money through grants and donations to fund her salary.

She weighed the options of keeping her salary and staying with the archdiocese or leaving the archdiocese and keeping Tomorrow's Present.

Too busy for health concerns

As Calderone-Stewart described it, she took a leap of faith. For the next eight years, Calderone-Stewart, a member of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, threw herself into work with the program, helping teens become leaders.

Describing Calderone-Stewart as "an Energizer Bunny-type person who is always moving," Gerri Sheets Howard, executive director of the House of Peace, said she embraced her ministry with passion and enthusiasm.

So committed to her work, she initially brushed off health concerns that surfaced about a year ago.

"I discovered a lump in my groin area and the first thing I thought of was lymphoma," Calderone-Stewart explained, but she also had a big workshop to coordinate, along with the 10th anniversary of Tomorrow's Present. She had been feeling tired since February and March and noticed the lump in April, but it wasn't until May that she saw a doctor. On June 2, she was diagnosed with stage 4 lymphoma. Two more biopsies produced more bad news in August: bile duct cancer in the liver.

The second cancer is aggressive and doesn't respond well to traditional treatments. One treatment, chemo-embolization, was unsuccessfully attempted in September – two days after her mother died after a drawn-out struggle with breast cancer.

Calderone-Stewart made it to her mother's wake in New Jersey, but was too sick to attend the funeral.

Had the procedure worked, she would have received treatments every four to six weeks to keep the malignancy from growing too quickly. Yet its side effects were terrible for Calderone-Stewart and the results were non-existent.

Cancer is terminal

Reality set in. The woman who only weeks earlier had been planning a youth retreat, and maintaining a frenetic schedule of work, ministry and writing, was told her cancer was terminal and she had a life expectancy of about six months.

Calderone-Stewart took that news in stride. Looking back on the way her father died "much too quickly" of a heart attack and her mother "so slowly that we never really knew when it was time to start saying our good-byes," Calderone-Stewart wrote that she was dying in the "perfect way."

"I have enough urgency to know that now is the time to say good-bye. And most importantly, I still have enough time — and enough mental/emotional capacity — to actually say it with depth and thoughtfulness," she wrote on her blog in early September.

"Because of this, I can actually say I am enjoying my dying — because it is bringing me such joy — because what is more joyful than this? Connecting with significant people and saying, 'Here is why I have loved you for so long.... Here is how you made my life more beautiful...

.' It's like a little bit of heaven here on earth."

Six months later, optimism remains

Six months have passed since she wrote those words, and Calderone-Stewart has spent nearly every minute of every day saying good-bye in different ways. She has kept a blog — which reflects her sense of humor, "Dying to Get to Know You," detailing her health journey, but more importantly sharing stories and memories about her vast circle of friends.

Many of them, including those from around the country, have come to spend time with her in her condo on the southwest side of Milwaukee. Her energy level is weakening, and Calderone-Stewart stopped driving some months ago. Much of her day is spent in a recliner, and when she moves around, she needs a walker. Yet, her enthusiasm is as strong as ever.

She led the monthly meeting of the Teen Leaders last weekend at the House of Peace, noted Sheets Howard, who said she is "amazed at what she continues to do, even in the midst of a trying health situation.

"When I see her come in, and she's not feeling well, when I see her with her walker, when she has to sit — and she's usually one of those Energizer Bunny type-people — for her to be so committed to her mission, her vocation ... it makes me determined to be faith-filled in my personal life, and my vocation as executive director. Now when I face the difficulties I have, if she can arise to the challenge she has before her, as a good soldier in the line of faith, I can get in line as well. She has not given up. She is an inspiration to me personally and for all of us at the House of Peace," said Sheets Howard.

Equating Calderone-Stewart to Capuchin Br. Booker Ashe, founder of the House of Peace, as a force in the Milwaukee community long after death, Sheets Howard said, "She will never be forgotten. The positive impact she's made on numerous young people who are scattered throughout the community and even the nation. We'll always see the fruits of her labor in all these young people throughout our nation."

Legacy is work with teens

Calderone-Stewart has also spent the past months raising money to ensure that Tomorrow's Present will continue. The

Leadership Center of Cardinal Stritch University has begun "The Legacy Fund for Tomorrow's Present: A Lasting Tribute to the work of Dr. Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart," and she was proud to report recently that the fund, which has raised \$40,000 thus far, is part of the Catholic Community Foundation.

She's also a guest blogger for U.S. Catholic and her self-published novel, "Made to Write," which she said contains "a little murder, a little romance, a few twists, and an inner city setting," is the story of a young volunteer at a community outreach center and can be ordered through her Web site.

"I'm surprised I'm doing so well," admitted Calderone-Stewart, in typical glass-half-full fashion. "The pain is more frequent, but not more painful. I could deal with this for a long time."

Had it been her call, Calderone-Stewart admitted she'd like to have lived to see her grandsons — 3-year-old twins, Evan and Issac, and 2-year-old Kaleb — grow up, and she'd like to have been able to continue her work with teens and to have more time with her sons and their wives, "but I have no complaint. I have had a great life, a family who just loved me — my niece, my grandchildren. I really have had a great life, I've met terrific people in ministry and a lot of people don't love their jobs, I've loved mine," she said.

"I was not exactly the picture of poor health. I was not obese, used to not overeat, but you just never know. I didn't smoke ... life is a mystery. Jesus only lived to be 33, and even more so, how many teenagers in Milwaukee die senseless deaths. That's the tragedy.

"I've lived over half a century, and have no complaining to do with God. I've had a wonderful life, got to do wonderful things and not everyone gets to die in such a nice way. I could have been hit by a bus," she said.

While death may be a certainty, Calderone-Stewart is determined that hope remains alive.

"Hope is really something we can do," she wrote on her blog. "And that hope cannot die with my passing. There will always be young people whose lives can be positively changed forever by Tomorrow's Present."

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