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Remembering Lillie

By Danette Dooley, Special to The Telegram

Lillie (Rice) Delaney's biggest fear was not of dying, but of being forgotten by those she'd leave behind.

"Mom said to me, even before she got sick, 'When I'm dead and gone, just don't forget about me.' I promised her that would never happen," says Delaney's son, Gord.

The young man's devotion to remembering his mother has grown into a yearly fundraising event that, thus far, has raised more than \$11,000 for various cancer charities.

For the second year in a row, Delaney is teaming up with the Dr. H. Bliss Murphy Cancer Care Foundation to raise money in his mother's memory. His goal this year is to top the \$20,000 mark.

Lillie Delaney passed away on Nov. 10, 2000. The longtime Newfoundland Liquor Corporation employee had yet to reach her 54th birthday.

Aged 22 at the time, Gord Delaney says it took him a while to come to terms with his feelings on the devastating loss.

"I spent two or three years after Mom passed away being really angry. Not myself. My friends even said I was a very different person."

Delaney says his mother's death was also devastating on his brother, Frank, who lives in Alberta and his father, Frank Sr. His parents had been married for more than 30 years, he says.

Since graduating with a commerce degree from Memorial University in 2002, Delaney has been using his marketing skills to organize his Lilies for Lillie fundraisers.

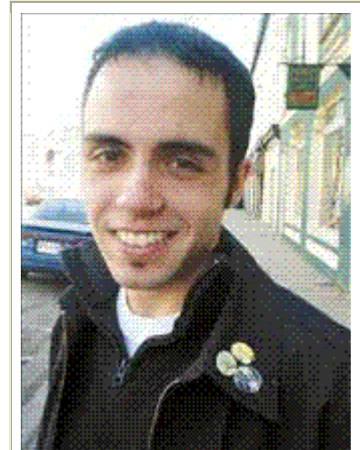
"For some reason at the funeral home, everybody sent lilies. So, I came up with the concept for the lapel pins. Now, everybody who goes around with these pins on their jackets will remember Mom, even if they didn't know her personally. And to this day, the more money we raise, the more people we can help. But, for me, it's still all about remembering Mom and celebrating her life."

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Lillie Delaney was healthy and full of life until about six months before her passing, her son says, recalling the day he'd learned that his mother had leukemia.

"I'm involved in the Regatta heavily and one day in May when I was going down for a spin on the lake, the doctor's office called because Mom had gone for blood work. ... I told Mom it was probably about her cholesterol or something. Then I went off to rowing.

"When I came back and walked in the door, my aunt and uncle were there. And Mom and Dad."



Gord Delaney founded Lilies for Lillie in honour of his mother.
(Photo: By Danette Dooley/Special to The Telegram)

Tears spill from Delaney's eyes as he recalls what happened next.

"They didn't want to tell Mom over the phone, but she was a very nervous person. She's been going to this doctor for 25 years, so he told her. She just looked at me and said, 'I got it.' Cancer's not even in our family, so I said, 'You got what?' She said 'I got cancer.' And she let out this big cry. I didn't know what to do."

Still dressed in sneakers, shorts and T-shirt from his rowing practice, Delaney bolted out the door.

"I just ran and ran and ran and ran. A friend of mine lives up in Cowan Heights and that's the only place I knew where to go. I mean, I just found out my mom had cancer. Then, within five minutes, I hear these tires screeching. And this was her. She said, 'Get in the car.' I got in the car and with that I just started crying."

While he wore his heart on his sleeve, Delaney says his mother remained strong. It's the way she lived her entire life, he says — a pillar of strength for those she loved.

"She said, 'We'll get through this.' Her strength that day was ... when she'd see us down she would always come up."

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Lillie underwent chemotherapy treatments every day while continuing to work full-time. However, when the end came, it came quickly, her son says. Her last few days were spent on a ventilator in the intensive care unit at the Health Sciences Centre.

"When they took us into a room and told us Mom had passed away, I just jumped up. I had to get out of there. They said, 'Don't you want to know?' I said, 'Honestly, I don't right now.' It wasn't important to me then to know the details. All I could think of was that she was gone."

Because his mother touched so many lives, Delaney says, the funeral home was extremely busy during the days leading up to his mother's funeral, with upwards to 2,000 people coming through to pay their last respects. Stories shared among friends, family and acquaintances during that time are still a source of strength to the family, he says.

"Mom was involved in so much at work, and she went roller-skating. She used to sing in nursing homes and down to the Waterford. She sang at weddings and she sang at funerals."

Delaney's smile broadens as he recalls one particular story from the funeral home.

"There was this one young fellow there and there was a woman with him. I'm not sure if he had Down's syndrome or not. He wasn't saying a whole lot. He was just looking at the casket. But we found out that he used to hang out at Churchill Square. Mom worked at the liquor store. Mom used to give him money for himself to go to Tim Horton's. And she'd get him to bring her down a muffin or something, too. She took the time to talk to him all the time. So I guess, the way he looked at it, he lost a friend."

Delaney says he also lost a friend as well as a mother.

"She was just the cool mother, but still very conservative. And there was nothing I couldn't talk to her about. The same thing with my brother. He had a different kind of relationship with her. But she was there for the two of us all the time."

The annual St. John's Regatta was as big an event in the Delaney household as Christmas, Delaney says of growing up in St. John's.

No one loved preparing for it more than his mother did, says Delaney, who's been a rower and a coxswain.

"The regatta was always huge for us. We'd cook a 25-pound turkey. We'd cook a ham. We'd have about a dozen salads. We used to get a permit down to the stadium parking lot. And it used to be one big party."

The party continues year after year, he says.

"But it's probably the hardest day of the year for us now."

Delaney hopes a benefit concert at the Bella Vista on Torbay Road on Saturday — in addition to his Lilies for Lillie lapel pins that are being sold at various locations throughout the province for \$2 — will help make this year's fundraising efforts the most profitable yet.

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The Dr. H. Bliss Murphy Cancer Foundation supports the Dr. H. Bliss Murphy Cancer Centre and affiliated cancer programs in Newfoundland and Labrador. All contributions remain in this province to fund cancer treatment and patient support programs.

It's fitting that his mother, who loved to sing and entertain, will be honoured during the benefit concert by such class acts as Siochana, Blue Eyed Blond, and Gulliver's Spree, a newly formed band featuring well-known musicians Dave Panting, Tom Boland and Tony Batten, Delaney says.

There is also a ticket draw with major prizes, including the grand prize of round-trip airfare to Calgary, seven nights hotel accommodation, a rental car and two tickets to the sold-out Alan Jackson concert. Second prize is a G-35 series Garrison guitar autographed by Canadian Idol's Rex Goudie and Melissa O'Neil, while third prize is a Fog Devils jersey autographed by the team.

While he will always believe his mother was too young to die, Delaney feels she'd be proud of him today for helping others win the battle that she could not.

"This has been a sense of therapy for me, I think," he says of his fundraising efforts.

"Here I am looking at this woman in a hospital bed who I was helpless for. I can tell you if I could switch spots with her I would. But I couldn't. So, unable to help the woman who helped me all my life, if I could keep one promise to her, this would be it."

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