

# Even When Heather 'Lost', She Was A Winner

By Valerie Fortney, Calgary Herald March 6, 2010

On a late fall day in 2008, Rita Gore found herself doing something "crazy" and "wonderful" at the same time.

"We ran up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum, and when we got to the top, punched the air with our fists, like in the movie Rocky," says Gore. "I didn't even know that's where it was filmed."

The friend who put her up to the whimsical gesture knew full well the significance of the spot. Heather MacDonald-Webber wasn't just recreating a great moment in cinematic history. As she raised both arms in the air in a symbol of victory, the Calgary born and bred dynamo was showing herself, and the world, that she was a winner.

On March 3, Heather died at the far too young age of 47, after her third battle with cancer, leaving her three daughters and husband Len, MLA for Calgary-Foothills, to mourn her loss along with hundreds of friends and supporters. Before she died, she told her loved ones she didn't want an obituary that said she had "lost" her battle: the word lost wasn't in her vocabulary.

"She was the kind of person who motivated others to be their best, to stay positive no matter what," says Len, who fell in love with his "best friend" when they were students at Red Deer College nearly three decades ago. "And she stayed motivated and upbeat right up until her last days."

Heather, then, died pretty much as well as she lived. As a teenager going to St. Mary's High School in the 1970s, the second oldest of five children proved herself a gifted athlete in a variety of sports, from cycling and swimming to volleyball.

"She was always on the go, always trying to get stronger," says her younger sister, Teri McKinnon, of the woman named athlete of the year at Red Deer College in the early 1980s.

"She also didn't believe in the word no."

After decades working in the field of corporate health and fitness while running a busy household, in 2000 Heather was diagnosed with breast cancer. Less than a year later, she had joined Sistership Calgary, a dragon boat racing team of women who had been touched by breast cancer.

"Heather intimidated me at first," says Gore of the woman who became a dragon boat coach in 2003. "She pushed all of us to do better, and I realized that she wasn't going to let cancer make her treat us like sissies. She drove us and herself hard, and I came to be in awe of her."

In between keeping her body as fit as possible, Heather also found the time to co-direct the Calgary CIBC Run for the Cure in 2006 and 2007, an event that has raised millions in the fight against breast cancer; in 2007 she was a finalist for the Toyota Never Quit Community Award. The organization noted that Heather received the most nominations in its three-year history. During the Alberta Centennial in 2005, she was awarded a Centennial Medal for her volunteer work in the community.

In 2007, Heather was diagnosed once again with cancer. Did that stop her? Not on your life. She participated as a Warrior with the Cancervive Peloton to Austin, Texas in 2007, and in 2008 found herself doing the Rocky thrust on the steps of the Philadelphia Museum, at a Livestrong event where she met cycling great and cancer survivor Lance Armstrong.

"It represented the way Heather lived her whole life," says longtime friend Vanessa Fischbuch, who met her through Sistership Calgary. "Heather was all about vitality and life. She motivated so many people to just do it, even when she was at a point where she wasn't physically able anymore."

Last March, cancer reared its ugly head for a third time. Heather's response to it? She invited friends and family to train with her for the Honolulu Marathon in December. Despite her stubborn determination not to let cancer get the better of her, by the time the marathon rolled around she wasn't healthy enough to run, or even walk, the course. Still, she insisted on being there to cheer on the 20 friends, who called themselves "Honolulu's Hopeful" as they crossed the finish line. "She could hardly walk from the hotel to the beach," says Len. "The doctors advised her against going, but she had to be there for her ladies."

This past week, the people closest to Heather have tried their best to stay strong as they prepare for her funeral mass, which takes place today at St. Luke's Catholic Church at 11 a.m. "We want to make her proud," says husband Len. "Heather believed that staying positive was the most important thing."

So far, they're doing a great job of making her proud. Only days after her mother died, Lauren Webber went on to becoming elected as the new president of the University of Calgary's students' union.

The strength she passed on to her children and others comes through in one of her last messages to family, friends, and the world at large:

"Put things on the books. Plan to travel, or do something fun or give yourself a challenge. Plan something big and plan something exciting down the road."

vfortney@theherald.canwest.com

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