

Longtime teen advocate with terminal cancer hopes her legacy continues

MILWAUKEE - Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart, whose life passion has been encouraging teens to be active church leaders, is now reaching a different audience through spiritual reflections that include unavoidable discussions about her terminal cancer.

Calderone-Stewart, author of 20 books, several leadership training manuals and dozens of articles on youth ministry, spirituality and catechesis, now writes a blog that reflects her sense of humor as she copes with advanced stages of liver cancer. The blog, "Dying to Get to Know You," details her health journey and shares stories and memories about her vast circle of friends. The blog is online at www.caringbridge.org/visit/lisacalderone. She also blogs for U.S. Catholic magazine.

She was diagnosed with cancer in 2003 and told in the fall of 2009 that she had six months to live. In her remaining days, she has been spending time with friends and family members and doing all she can to ensure the future of a leadership program she created called "Tomorrow's Present," which is part of Cardinal Stritch University Leadership Center in Milwaukee. The program is co-sponsored by Milwaukee's House of Peace, a community outreach center run by the Capuchin Franciscans.

The leadership center is sponsoring a legacy fund in Calderone-Stewart's name, which has so far enabled the program to hire a full-time successor and continue its groundbreaking research on youth leadership.

In an interview last March with the Catholic Herald, Milwaukee archdiocesan newspaper, Calderone-Stewart 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 that she's slowly given away her meaningful possessions to family members.

"I have enough urgency to know that now is the time to say goodbye. And most importantly, I still have enough time – and enough mental/emotional capacity – to actually say it with depth and thoughtfulness," she wrote in a blog entry.

Calderone-Stewart, who turns 53 on Jan. 14, 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.

Soon after college she was coaching a swim team of children ages 6 to 18. To help the team overcome its losing record, she devised a system that relied on the leadership of the older children to guide the younger ones. The successful buddy system led to a championship season and an invitation to work with youth at the Catholic parish.

Years later she held positions in youth ministry in the Diocese of Grand Island, Neb., and the Milwaukee Archdiocese where she developed Tomorrow's Present as a result of her doctoral project on teenagers as present and future leaders.

When her job title changed at the archdiocese, Calderone-Stewart found a home for the teen leadership program with the Capuchins' House of Peace and eventually it became part of Cardinal Stritch University.

When she was diagnosed with cancer, Calderone-Stewart was busy planning a youth retreat and maintaining a frenetic schedule of work, ministry and writing.

"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."

Recently, Calderone-Stewart received a National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry award for promoting Gospel values of justice and peace. The biennial award is given to an adult who exhibits behaviors and practices that serve as a model to

others involved in Catholic ministry with young people.

Awards were presented Dec. 10 during the group's annual convention in New Orleans. Calderone-Stewart received her award in New Jersey while in hospice care. Currently, she is back in Milwaukee to be with family and friends.

Peter J. Holbrook, executive director of Cardinal Stritch University's Leadership Center, said Calderone-Stewart "has spent a lifetime working to develop young leaders of character."

"Her work is a living legacy to the belief that all young people have the capacity to make a positive difference in their community," he added. "Her work demonstrates that to have impact, young people need access to a leadership framework that creates positive change and transformation through nonviolent action."

Contributing to this story was Maryangela Layman Roman in Milwaukee.