

Living while dying: serving others keeps Sandy Dennis alive

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Sandy Dennis at work making Hands for Hope Cards to raise funds for the Gilles Boudreau and Friends Cancer Help Fund. - Sandra Phinney

Sandy Dennis (née Kane) has faced major challenges in her life, yet has always found the inner fortitude to rise above her fears, reinvent herself, and move on.

In February of 2017, the Yarmouth resident was diagnosed with cancer. She is now Stage 4 terminal. Yes, she is dying; but she continues to find ways and means to give purpose and meaning to her life. In the process, she's become an inspiration to countless people in her community and beyond.

Dennis learned from a young age the importance of dealing with the cards life dished out. She never denied, hid from, or fought against tough situations. "I just dealt with them," she says.

From the time her parents separated when she was a toddler, Dennis had been shunted back and forth between relatives.

In the summer of '68, Dennis was 15 years old, on her own, and fending for herself by taking care of six children for a doctor and his wife in Sydney when serendipity stepped in.

She met Brenda Gregory, who encouraged her to apply for a job at General Instruments. Within short order, Dennis got a social insurance number and landed a job on the assembly line making radios.

As she didn't have a place to stay, the Gregorlys offered her a room.

"They lived in the last house in the coke ovens in Sydney," Dennis says, adding, "They were so sweet to me."

After 16 months of earning \$1 an hour (with a two-cent raise after six months) Dennis was offered a job as a waitress for \$1.10 an hour — plus tips — at a restaurant in Sydney.

Fast forward to 1990. She is a single mom, living in Truro and selling cars.

On a rare night out, she and a girlfriend go to the piano bar at the Glengarry Inn where they meet a couple of army chaps stationed at Debert.

They all go Tim Hortons for a coffee. She was attracted to one guy. "The night we met, I couldn't remember his name. But we met a few days later in a grocery store. His name was Ken Dennis. We decided to see each other again."

Sandy and Ken married in September of 1991. By combining their collective sons and daughters, they became a ready-made family of six.

Three years later (after Ken retired from the army) they moved to Port Maitland, and eventually into Yarmouth. They also opened a gift shop at The Yarmouth Mall. In 2010, Sandy's Gifts moved to Main Street.

Meanwhile, Sandy never forgot her past. She had experienced abuse, poverty, and homelessness. "But I've always lived with reality. I just accepted things and learned how to deal with it."

She never said, "Why me?" She moved on.

At the same time, she's grateful to people — often strangers — who helped her out. Feeling compelled to give back, Dennis submitted her name to serve on Yarmouth's town council, and was elected in 2012. She's now serving her second term.

Mention the name Sandy Dennis in Yarmouth and people's eyes light up.

Many recall post tropical storm Arthur which battered parts of the province on July 4, 2014 with wind gusts of 100-130 km/h. Before the storm had subsided, Sandy was putting out SOS's on Facebook, making phone calls and rounding up volunteers to clean up the debris.

"Ken brought his chain saw and we went into Frost Park with a team and cleaned it up." They also dug deep into their own pockets and gave gift certificates to people who had lost food due to losing power.

Over the years, it's been common to see Sandy painting buildings in the town simply because they were an eyesore.

"Some people say it's not a councillor's job," she says, "But when I ran for council, people wanted me to change what the town looked like."

Then two major turning points happened back to back early in 2017. The owners of the building they were renting needed the space so Sandy's Gifts closed at the end of January. The following week, Sandy went to the hospital with severe abdominal pains. A CT scan indicated a mass on her lungs. A biopsy confirmed she had cancer.

She didn't go into a spin. Rather, she put into practice her lifelong method of coping: pray, accept reality and move on. Moving on for the past 16 months has involved accepting that cancer now occupies space in her stomach, spine, both lungs, and brain. The pain has often been overwhelming, exacerbated by complications with some medications.

For example, one medication kept her awake 24-7 for three solid weeks. Another caused pimples to break out all over her head. "In the morning (because of the pus) it was like worms coming out of my face. It burned like fire."

Yet she's never lost faith. And she's never stopped serving on town council and doing good works in the community.

This past July, she took part in The Wheelchair Challenge initiated by local podiatrist Michael Innis, who invited town officials to spend a day sitting in a wheelchair, getting in and out of various places in the town.

Coun. Wade Cleveland says, "She showed up with Ken and one of her daughters. She was just amazing. Sandy has this will to raise awareness and to get things done for others."

During the past year Dennis also served on a steering committee working towards getting radiation therapy in Yarmouth.

Cleveland adds that she's filled people with inspiration. "For me, it's a lesson. You've heard that old cliché: It's not how you die; it's how you live. Well, watching her, it's not a cliché anymore."

Sandy Dennis celebrated her 65th birthday on July 9 this year. "I wanted to live long enough to get 'the cheque,'" she says with a wry smile.

On a more serious note, she adds, "A lot of people don't live that long so I feel blessed. There are people much worse off than me. And I've had so much support from Ken and the family."

She sees Ken as the unsung hero of her story. "I've had to depend on him for so much." She would prefer the spotlight be on him.

Ken deflects the attention back to his wife. "Sandy's strong," he says. "I just do the things she wants to do. I have the time."

Part of what his wife wanted to do was plan her funeral. She's always loved Christmas so there will be red and white flowers and the Canadian flag. The hymns she selected include: In The Garden, Amazing

Grace, and How Great Thou Art. Her urn is red and silver and will be buried close to where Ken's parents are buried in the Riverside Cemetery in Hebron.

"Planning reduces the stress," Ken says. He's also a believer in talking things through.

"Communication is so important. You really need to be open with each other. It's a journey you are taking together."

When it comes to stress, Sandy's biggest stress buster this summer was making handcrafted special occasion gift cards to raise funds for the Gilles Boudreau and Friends Cancer Help Fund. She calls them Hands for Hope Cards, and makes them in between treatments, bouts of pain and extreme fatigue.

Yes, Sandy Dennis is dying. But she's living life to the fullest.

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