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Support legacy for dying youth ministry activist

by Pat Marrin

NCR Today

If we needed a measure of Lisa Calderone-Stewart's devotion to her ministry with youth, it is astonishing that she has virtually provided her own salary and program support for the past 10 years through her fundraising and grant-writing efforts.



https://www.ncronline.org/sites/default/files/stories/images/oldimgs/MTW%20Calderone-Stewart_0.thumbnail.jpg

"Tomorrow's Present," the name of the program she founded in 1999 while working with the Milwaukee archdiocese as an associate youth director, lost funding in 2000. Calderone-Stewart found a new home for the program in 2005 at the Franciscan-run House of Peace in Milwaukee and helped raise the funds that have supported its training programs for inner-city youth over the past 10 years.

In August of 2009, Calderone-Stewart was diagnosed with liver cancer and told by doctors that she had six months to live. She again helped raise funds and handed on directorship for Tomorrow's Present to the Leadership Center at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee.

Calderone-Stewart, 52, has survived nearly a year longer than her fatal diagnosis projected. She continues

to promote Tomorrow's Present through her personal blog, "Dying to Know You Better," which has logged over 40,000 visitors to date, and through sales of a book she began writing in 2009 before her diagnosis.

The book is presented as a novel, allowing the author to tell her story in the voice and guise of a fictional narrator, Nellie Massa, through her correspondence with friends and a likewise fictional "Sr. Agnes," director of vocations for a religious community Nell is seeking to join. It is Sr. Agnes who insists that Nell write about her life as a 51-year-old widow with an extensive resume in youth ministry. Nell is reluctant to share her many personal relationships, hence the book's title, "Made to Write."

But share she does, and the reader is privy to the intimate details of Nell's lifelong quest for love and acceptance, including her mysterious rejection at the altar by the love of her life and a subsequent failed marriage.

The narrative is interspersed with a kind of compendium of the author's own professional commitment to youth ministry, descriptions of her work with teens and a realistic description of the travails and adventures of holding together and staffing an inner city ministry that tracks the often chaotic pulse of youth in search of meaning in a culture of violence and misdirection.

The personal exposure afforded by the book and the blog is Calderone-Stewart's final offering to help support the continuation of her life's work. Though her days are spent on a recliner, with regular contact with family, friends and program staff, and even outings to a swimming pool to continue a lifelong regimen of swimming laps from her days as a youth coach, Calderone-Stewart is both living and dying to sustain a legacy on behalf of youth leadership formation.

To share in that legacy, visit her Web site, donate to Tomorrow's Present and consider buying a copy of her book, with 100 percent of profits from sales going to the legacy fund.

[Pat Marrin is editor of *Celebration*, the worship resource of the *National Catholic Reporter*. *Celebration* published "Pebbles for Peace," by Lisa Calderone-Stewart in its February 2006 issue. Visit *Celebration's* Web site and download a free issue.]

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