



Up Close...

Linda Berard: a profile in courage

Steve Brecher - Main Street

Linda Berard was living a normal, happy life in Fabreville (Laval), surrounded by her husband, Yves, whom she met in 1984, and her two daughters, Jannik (26) and Olivia (24). She had made her way up from the bottom of the corporate ladder, to the position of marketing analyst and strategist, first at Pirelli Tires (15 years) and subsequently at Standard Products Inc. (12 years). She was active, healthy and making plans for a promising future.

And then something happened.

About 8 years ago, at age 40, Linda started to experience an intermittent shaking in her legs. She thought it was from drinking too much coffee. Meanwhile, Yves was having trouble hearing Linda's voice on the telephone. "Speak up," he would say. Gradually she became mired in a depression. She lost over 50 pounds in less than a year. She also exhibited obsessive behaviour. So she turned over her credit cards to Yves.

In 2014 following an exhaustive battery of tests at the Montreal Neurological Institute, Linda was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. She was 44 years old.

"Parkinson's disease affects the way a person moves. Symptoms begin when someone experiences a 'problem' with certain nerve cells in the brain called the basil ganglia and the substantia nigra. Normally these nerve cells make an important chemical called dopamine, which sends signals to the part of our brain that controls movement. While the disease chiefly affects middle-aged and elderly individuals, it can be diagnosed much earlier, as in the much-reported case of actor Michael J. Fox." (Beth Spindler, Yoga International, March 4, 2016.)

Linda was obliged to confront her situation at work. "I experienced hardship of a cognitive nature," she told me. "My memory was affected, and I slowed down in managing my tasks. I felt that I wasn't being fair to my team and my employer. I wasn't meeting expectations. They weren't getting what they were paying for, and yet they didn't ask me to leave."

As she put it: "It was time for me to lay down my arms."

Linda had always been a caring, family oriented person. She had already shouldered the burden of misfortunes. Her father, a founder of Grimard Optique, contracted Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and died at age 58, and spent his last 5 years in a hospital bed. Her mother, a seamstress, succumbed to breast cancer at age 60.

Well before her diagnosis, Linda's daughter, Olivia, suggested to her sister and parents that they enshrine their commitment to each other by way of a special memento. They spent 8 hours together in a tattoo parlour, each receiving the acronym JOLY (Jannik, Olivia, Linda, Yves), which they proudly display. Linda's tattoo is located on the nape of her neck. She also sports a colourful tattoo on her left forearm in Chinese calligraphy containing the symbols for courage and hope. She has given out a rubber wristband stamped with these same words to certain people. (I am honoured to be among them.)

Linda summoned up the courage to put together an extensive medical and caregiver team, in order to transform her malady into an opportunity for hope and encouragement to others who might benefit from reduced suffering and possible despair. She overcame resistance to join a Parkinson's support group in the Laurentians, notwithstanding that she is considerably younger than the others and further advanced in her symptoms.

In the past two years she has become a veritable dynamo. She is actively raising money for Parkinson Quebec through a series of events that recently included an indoor golf event at Bistrogolf in Saint Sauveur. She informed me that 25,000 Quebecers and 100,000 Canadians suffer from Parkinson's disease. She has been encouraged to learn from her neurologist, Dr. Edward Fon, Chief of Research at the Douglas Hospital, that a major breakthrough may be on the horizon.

Linda's most ambitious fundraising challenge is set for Saturday, August 26, 2017. It is the seventh edition of Defi Velo Parkinson, a cycling event of 4 circuits (30, 60, 90, and 150 kilometers) in Laval and the Lower Laurentians. Linda and her colleague, Chantal Pelletier (Entraidons-Nous), also a Parkinsonian in her forties, will be cycling for 60 kilometres. We will all be pulling for them.

For more information you can consult their website: clenvelo.com.