

THE GLOBE & MAIL

OBITUARY

MAID advocate savoured life ‘until her last breath’

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 17 APRIL 2022

FOR SUBSCRIBERS



Nicole Gladu in her lawyer's office in Montreal, in June, 2017. Ms. Gladu died on March 27, at age 76. PAUL CHIASSON/THE CANADIAN PRESS

In hospital near the end of her life, Nicole Gladu, journalist, crusader and fiercely loyal friend, did not use medical assistance in dying, even though she had won a court battle with Ottawa, extending the right to MAID to those, like her, whose natural death was not reasonably foreseeable.

“I asked her, ‘Nicole, is it time? Do you want medical help to die?’ ” her friend, Micheline Raymond recalled. “She said, ‘No, I don’t want to open that drawer yet.’ Above all, she wanted to have the choice, and she wanted others to have the choice, too.

“Nicole was an example for us all,” Ms. Raymond continued. “She lived by the maxim that if you believe in something, you fight for it, and you fight hard. And really, she didn’t fight for the right to die. Rather, she fought for the right to live the way she wanted to, and she savoured that life right up until her last breath.”

Ms. Gladu, a familiar figure in Quebec with spectacles perched on her head, a no-nonsense manner and her body twisted into a wheelchair, was 76 when she

died of natural causes on March 27 at the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal. Although there was no glass of rosé Champagne in one hand, or a canapé of foie gras in the other, as she had once wished, she lived a full and vibrant life, filled with close friends that became her family and career postings in places such as Paris, New York and Quebec City.

“She was like my second mother,” said Mathieu Piché-Messier, a new father whose parents, retired Quebec Superior Court judge Ginette Piché and lawyer Pierre Messier, considered her as family. “We have just exchanged one angel for another.”

When she was four years old, Ms. Gladu survived polio. Years later, in 1992, she was diagnosed with postpoliomyelitis syndrome, which strikes decades after the initial exposure to the virus and can cause muscular atrophy, joint and muscle tissue pain, and extreme fatigue. Eventually, with her childhood scoliosis returning in full force, she needed a wheelchair – a fact she determined would never stop her from living as normal a life as possible.

In 2016, the federal government amended the Criminal Code to set the parameters for medical assistance in dying, or MAID, but the amendment did not include people who had incurable degenerative diseases that greatly affected their quality of life but did not pose a risk of imminent death. The Quebec law, which fuzzily dictated that a person be at the “end of life,” did not do so, either.

The following year, Ms. Gladu and Jean Truchon, who had cerebral palsy, challenged the amendment in Quebec Superior Court. Alongside their lawyer, Jean-Pierre Ménard, they argued that even though their deaths were not “reasonably foreseeable,” as dictated by the Criminal Code, they were exactly the kind of people the legislation was supposed to help.

“It’s absolutely deplorable that these people who meet the law’s criteria – a serious and irremediable illness with intolerable suffering – need to go to court to have their rights met,” Mr. Ménard told a news conference at the time.

Two years later, Quebec Superior Court Justice Christine Baudouin agreed, finding that the provisions in both the federal and provincial laws were an infringement of the “life, liberty and security of the person” under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The judge gave Ottawa and Quebec six months to come up with something new before suspending the provision of the laws altogether.

The result was Bill C-7, which repealed the “reasonably foreseeable” clause, expanded the definition of those who were eligible for MAID and implemented safeguards to ensure they were making the decision of their own volition. It was made law on March 17, 2021.

In an interview with The Canadian Press in December, 2020, Ms. Gladu dismissed those who claimed the law would leave people with disabilities vulnerable to being pressured into asking for MAID, saying they were paternalistic and incapable of understanding what living with physical pain means.

As for those who worried that opening MAID to people like her would send a message that life with a disability was not worth living, she said: “My life journey proves that a handicap can stimulate a person to move back her limits.”

Helen Long, the chief executive of Dying with Dignity Canada, lauded Ms. Gladu for her determination and advocacy on behalf of people with degenerative conditions. “Her contribution to legacy in the fight for end-of-life rights will never be forgotten,” she said. “We will be forever grateful for her efforts.”

Patrick Martin-Ménard, who worked with his father on the case, said Ms. Gladu’s fortitude and demeanour throughout taught him never to give up.

“When we were in court, she was so impressive and determined,” he said. “You could see her getting tired but would still give interviews, gracious, intense and straightforward.”

And in a Twitter post, federal Justice Minister David Lametti noted that Ms. Gladu “made the whole country reflect on what suffering and dignity meant.”

Nicole Gladu was born on Aug. 7, 1945, the older of Marcel Gladu and Jeannette Lamoureux’s two daughters. Her father was a teacher and her mother, a housewife.

Growing up in Montreal’s east side, she was 10 years old when she discovered by happenstance that she had been adopted. Homeschooled as she slowly

recovered from polio, at the time her world was limited to a room on the second floor of the family's home on Fabre Street; her father was wont to bring home piles of books for her, all wrapped in a towel. One day, while her parents were at the supermarket, she went to get a new book and the towel contents spilled out on the floor. As she put everything back, she saw a letter from the Quebec government, the subject of which was "your adoptive daughter, Nicole."

She was so struck by this, she went into the bathroom and stared into the mirror.

"I had the impression I was looking at a stranger," she would later write.

Ms. Piché, the retired judge, first met Ms. Gladu at a Montreal college run by nuns.

"It was the kind of place where we were taught that as long as we worked hard, nothing was impossible," she said. "We ran the college newspaper, with Nicole as the director and me as the editor-in chief. It was a wonderful newspaper that won awards."

In the late 1960s, the two friends began to study at the University of Montreal, but Ms. Gladu spent little more than a year there. With a summer internship at Radio-Canada, she began to home in on what she wanted to do with her life, and she started work that fall for Montréal-Matin, a daily newspaper that folded in 1978.

Soon, she was breaking barriers by working in the newspaper's parliamentary bureau in Quebec City, a place that was filled mostly with men. But she wanted more, and soon struck out for Paris, then New York, where she spent her first four years as the attaché in charge of French communications at the United Nations, and another four years as the head of communications for Quebec's delegation to the city.

Without fail, each Friday at midnight, she would have long phone conversations with the Piché-Messier family, where they'd catch each other up on the week, and talk politics, hopes and dreams.

"It was an unbreakable date," Ms. Piché said. "We chose midnight because the phone tariffs were much cheaper at that time of night, and we had so much to tell each other."

While in New York, Ms. Gladu began to experience the effects of postpoliomyelitis syndrome, and she came home to Montreal. She continued to be fiercely independent and accomplished, working for the provincial government in various posts and completing a Master's in public administration at the École nationale d'administration publique.

She lived until near the end of her life in a 14th-floor condo with a view of the St. Lawrence River that stretched out before her, inexorable, reflecting the seasons, sunsets and storms.

Ms. Gladu, whose sister, Marielle, died in a car accident at the age of 14, leaves a group of friends who became her family.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-maid-advocate-savoured-life-until-her-last-breath/>

As in the Abortion Wars, the debate over MAiD, or assisted suicide, gets distorted in ugly ways. Paternalism, hiding behind a devotion to life and God, knows no bounds, in an arena wherein the “Pro-Lifers” really know little, if anything. The God-fearing crowd grossly misrepresent the God I know who transcends all the “irredeemable tragedies” and “crimes” said to have been committed against Him. My God has far more compassion and capacity to understand, accept, carry, “save” and salvage than those who claim to know Him best would have us believe. The Creator authoritatively knows the way around and through the “messier” parts of Creation far more than we know.

As has been noted, the opponents of “choice,” grandstanding, soon display no care for the life forced into the world, and only truncated concern for the suffering soul enduring the excruciating end of it. When God is dragged into the argument in this way, far more is said about human pretensions than about “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” What people at such times of especial *extremis* need most is support and help, other and all points of view, respect for the terrible position in which they have been placed, in such decision-making, more than protection from themselves. The “protection” they most often need is from paternalistic pretenders to profundity acting out their ignorant arrogance on them. As Nicole Gladu demonstrated, grant people their rights and autonomy in such matters, and they may well feel empowered to make the best decisions. Sure, “mistakes” will be made, suggested in hindsight, but allowing for only one kind of mistake (on the No side) just makes for more mistakes ultimately. Further, who can be so sure what truly constitutes a “mistake”—especially an “unforgivable” one—in the eyes, heart, and wisdom of God? It is not our comfort that matters when people are forced to wrestle with terrible life-and-death decisions; they need what we would need –what we all might well need eventually—in navigating through such crucible times and processes. TJB