

BULLETIN

## Roots, community, inspiration

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by KELLY FINLAYSON



**s a union activist** working in a health care profession, I am constantly yearning for self-growth or so-called teachable moments; recently, three that I would like to share collided in my life.

The first was being asked to speak at the funeral of a man I had known all my life, the second was attending a week-long leadership course run by our national union (National Union of Public and General Employees), and the third was the diagnosis of breast cancer in one of my close co-workers. Together, these events reinforced for me the importance of balancing work, leisure and family.

My childhood friend asked me to speak at her fathers funeral through the eyes of a child and his influence on my life. That caused me to think: what will I say and what did he mean to me?

My main message for the family and friends was describing the importance of growing up in a small isolated logging community on the north end of Vancouver Island, and the influences that has had on my development over time. I spoke about the security and caring of that nurturing environment and how her dad was part of that. No wonder I am a union activist ... I belong in a strong supportive community environment ... I need to live my roots.

The NUPGE leadership course was phenomenal and focused on a broad range of topics such as strategic planning versus strategic choices, the Canadian economy, and understanding the public versus private fight. We had an excellent overview of labour history, and heard from two experts on our public pension plans, and the voodoo myths surrounding the baby boomer demography.

The main nugget that I brought away from the week is that as a leader of a public sector union, I have a deep responsibility to the membership.

I must work hard to ensure that our union does a careful analysis of our organizational capacity, taking into consideration many different factors including our external environments ... both federal and provincial. We must look at our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats and make conscious decisions and choices that will best serve the members of our union. I love the challenge of analytical thinking and problem solving, and hope my skills will continue to serve our members well.

The third teachable moment is the most difficult to speak about. I want to talk to you about my co-worker ... a natural born leader ... who has recently been diagnosed with breast cancer. I want to uphold this friend to you as a shining example of how individuals can make a difference through choices.

Her story is typical in many ways. She has worked in health care for more than 20 years, many of those as a casual because she chose to make her family her primary job, and her career secondary. Casual status meant

that she accumulated limited benefits, compared to a worker with regular status.

Nevertheless, she embraced her career with a passion unparalleled by many. Always determined to make a difference, she became the HSA chief steward, and was active in the community, lobbying successfully for a breast-screening center in the community. While undertaking those challenges she continued her own education to the point that when she returned to our department, she was qualified to step into training on our new CT machine.

She promised her family that she would slow down a little, so she did not resume her union activities in our hospital. Instead, she became involved in her young daughters school and skating world, and organized a book club for our department.

Now, entering the world of diagnosis and treatment she includes us ... her co-workers and friends ... in her personal fight. She brought her journal in for us in which she outlines her plan for dealing with the fight ahead ... including how she wants us to deal with the pain we feel losing her from our work place. The final sentence in her journal is, -Life is swirling on around me in a big vortex of good things and bad but I feel surrounded by such powerful good stuff. I am happy."

This is a truly amazing woman ... one who is a natural born leader and who constantly makes choices in her life that influence others around her. She has taught us all that one person really can be a transformative force. 

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