

Cathy Connealy Was A Star

By Hon. Sandra Midkiff

Cathy Connealy died in December, 2007, at the young age of 60, after a long and courageous battle with cancer. Her life has been an inspiration to me and to many women lawyers. My connections with Cathy Connealy date back to law school, to many common and shared friends and to some shared experiences. Since her death, I've found myself thinking about Cathy many times, trying to pinpoint the things that made her so special—so remarkable—as a lawyer, a person committed to social justice, and a gentle human being. Her life is a model for all of us. Where to begin with describing Cathy. Hard to say, because she is not a person easily compartmentalized. Cathy grew up the Brookside area. After Visitation grade school, St. Teresa's Academy, and Avila College (1969), Cathy set out to change the world as a social worker. Cathy traveled this path for the rest of her life with her lifelong friend Ann Cameron Damico. Their friendship, constant to the end, is only one of the charming and remarkable qualities that I now so admire.

In 1972, Cathy was already on her path of "changing the world", when she was fired from her job as a Social Worker for the Juvenile Court. Reason for termination (Cathy proudly reported for the rest of her career): having a McGovern bumper sticker on her car. Those who knew Cathy well were not surprised that this was little factoid appeared in her obituary. Her discharge became her motivation to attend law school. That little McGovern bumper sticker launched Cathy Connealy on her way to becoming an outstanding attorney in this community.

Cathy entered law school and graduated from UMKC School of Law in 1976. She then joined the firm of young activist lawyers who joined together as a law collective. That firm (where she practiced her entire legal career) ultimately became known as Slough, Connealy, Irwin and Madden LLC. The firm was unique. It was a group of very bright, high achieving young lawyers who were uniquely committed to the defense of civil liberties and providing legal services for the poor and underprivileged. Those who stayed or joined

that practice have distinguished themselves as bright, accomplished and well-respected attorneys.

To those who watched Cathy's firm grow, it was obvious that their focus was social justice. Navy suits, billable hours and partnership track were clearly not the focus of this wonderfully unique law firm. The firm eventually located in office space over The Corner Restaurant in Westport. Not AAA rental space, but courageously and conveniently located for many clients served. The lack of navy suits and AAA rental space didn't stand in the way of remarkable accomplishments for Cathy and her law partners.

One thing that I've decided, is that Cathy was born with "tax genes." After graduating from law school, Cathy quickly obtained an LLM in Taxation. (Take heart in knowing that although Cathy was very bright, but she also happened to be the daughter of an accountant-father, and 4 of her 6 brothers that became accountants or CPAs.) So while I report to you that she was a tax whiz, we can all take comfort in knowing that Cathy was born with tax genes and competitive spirit.

But Cathy was unique in her tax career. As her law partner Fred Slough described, "she ran a "tax therapy" clinic every tax season and was well loved by her clients." UMKC Tax Professor Ed Hood described her this way: "Cathy was one of my all time favorite tax students. She was very bright and very unusual. She demonstrated that a tax lawyer need not devote her career to making the rich richer; rather she used her skills to help poor and middle income taxpayers navigate around the land mines contained in the Internal Revenue Code. I always admired the way she used her tax knowledge in the development of law-income housing for

the underprivileged. She was a wonderful human being."

Cathy's tax practice grew, and over time she built a reputation as an one of the best tax lawyers in this town. She did this by working diligently, and remaining true to her values. In addition to her annual "tax therapy" clinics, Cathy developed a reputation for being the "go to" person for not-for-profits. And that was just the beginning of her contribution to the community in Kansas City during her lifetime.

As I read Cathy's obituary and heard more stories and listings of her accomplishments following her death, I have become more and more amazed by the extent of Cathy's accomplishments and contributions to our city. The list of charitable and humanitarian achievements is staggering. She received the Don Quixote Award from the UMKC Law School. Women's Political Caucus gave her the Above and Beyond Award for her activism on behalf of victims of domestic

violence. She served as a board member and President of the Rose Brooks Center. She was recognized for her work on the Human Rights Project—working for the rights of all persons irrespective of whom they love. She also worked with the Westside Housing Organization, the old Westport Free Health Clinic, the Mattie Rhodes Center, the Vietnam Veterans Against War, the equal rights for all movement. She worked with neighborhood housing organizations for which she helped establish low-income housing.

The list of community contributions goes on. Cathy was able to combine her legal and tax skills to further her commitment to social justice. And she did this, not as a hurry-up, powerhouse, blue-suited lawyer. She did this as a quiet, soft-spoken and committed volunteer. Not one to shrink from controversial causes she believed in. Not one focused on collecting or seeking public acclaim, but one who worked constantly for the social causes that she believed in. What is remarkable is not only the extent of Cathy's

community activities, but her courageous pursuit of causes—regardless of their current popularity.

Isn't that enough, you ask? An accomplished lawyer, a partner in her well-established law firm, a recognized community activist and volunteer; that is all part of the remarkable portrait of Cathy Connealy. But there is more. And that is Cathy, the person. As her law partner Fred Slough described her as this beautiful woman "with one of the most beautiful smiles know to the human race." She was modest. She was soft-spoken, gentle in her nature, approachable in conversation. My husband Albert remembers this about her: If Cathy found out you disagreed with her on some political

issue, look out. She would gently and sweetly engage you in conversation, and with her unique combination of kind smile, soft nature and effective reasoning, she could disarm any opponent.

I remember her as the devoted friend of many people. Always loved and surrounded by the interesting, happy, creative and unique people. I remember her ability to pull people together in support of our friend Bob Landman during his courageous struggle with ALS disease. Others might stand back, not knowing how to approach Bob. Not Cathy. She was the one who organized parties and gatherings so that we could all see and visit with Bob as long as that remained possible.

In her last year, Cathy's long battle with cancer finally caught up with her. She worked long after most would have retired to their final days. Her law partners remember many days when Cathy worked with surgical drains under her clothes. Still there, working with her best friends at their law firm.

Cathy was a star. A champion to the end. Whatever she did, Cathy did her best. In all of her endeavors, Cathy was a remarkable person. A remarkable lawyer. An amazing humanitarian and giver to our community. A remarkable human being, with a loving, gentle spirit to be modeled by all of us.

For those who knew her, she remains in our hearts. I will always wish I had known her better.

For those who did not know her, consider this remarkable set of professional and personal qualities. She was an example for all of us.



Cathy Connealy