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RIP Carrie: Love never ends

Heidi Schlumpf | Jun. 20, 2013 NCR Today

Some funerals are harder than others. Any death is a deep loss, and certainly someone dying after a long and happy life doesn?t necessarily make the grief any easier. But the death of a child has to be the most gut-wrenching, and that of a mother of young kids a close second. I have been to the funerals of too many young mothers lately, and yesterday I said goodbye to another one taken too early from her husband and children.

Carrie Swearingen was many things. When I first met her, some 15 years ago, she was director of communications for the Catholic Extension Society [1] in Chicago. Before that, she had been employed at the Fox Broadcasting Company, even assisting at the Emmy Awards. More recently, she had been working for herself as a freelance writer and marketing strategist, with her writing appearing in secular and Catholic publications. She co-authored a book, As She Asks [2], about Medjugorje after her own life-altering journey there, and even interviewed Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones.

But Carrie?s most important job title was ?Mommy.? A breast cancer survivor, Carried had been told she could not have children. But, as the homilist at her funeral said today, ?Carrie refused to accept that.? She and her husband, Stefano Mereu, would eventually have two ?miracle babies??Matteo in 2003 and Francesca in 2005. In an interview, [3] Carrie described how she was ?blown away? by the love she felt for her children: ?I was surprised that I had that much love in me.?

So when her cancer returned three years ago, Carrie?s only thought was that she had to live for her children. By this time, she and I were friends only through an online Catholic writers? group, known for prayerful support among its members. She was often very candid with the group about her frustrations and trials throughout her illness, writing for the last time just two weeks ago about how excruciating it was to tell her children, ?Mommy is going to die this summer.?

Carrie fought cancer with the same passionate tenacity that she brought to everything in life, but she did it for others, not just for herself. She did everything she could to not lose her hair during treatment, so her children would remember her as the same Mommy they always had. As she prepared for what she hoped was a ?holy death,? she was even thinking about where she should die so it might be less traumatic for her children.

At today?s packed funeral at St. Mary Parish in Evanston, people sobbed openly, especially the women, those other mothers for whom leaving their children would be their worst nightmare. I am sure that younger moms think about this too, but there is something about having children later in life that inevitably leads to anxiety about living to see your children launched. At 49, just a few months older than Carrie, I?m always thinking, ?I just need to get them to adulthood.?

The members of the writers? group, which lost another young mother in Emilie Lemmons [4] almost five years ago, are men and women of strong faith, and many expressed the fervent belief that Carrie will not only now enjoy her heavenly reward, but also that she will still be with us?and with her children?in a different, but not necessarily less real, way.

Today, Carrie said the same thing. In a letter read at the funeral, she said goodbye to us all, but promised her husband and children her continued presence just beyond the thin veil that separates this world from those who are with God. She said her husband would hear her voice (if it?s saying to water the garden, he can know it?s her), and she would watch her children?s performances and basketball games from the front row. She is with me, too, as I try to be a better mother to my children. Thank you, Carrie, for teaching all of us that love truly never ends.

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Links:
[1] http://www.catholicextension.org/
[2] http://www.amazon.com/She-Asks-Father-Jozo-Zovko/dp/B00157UGYW/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1371699587&sr=8-1&keywords=Carrie+Swearingen
[3] http://peacegardenwriter.blogspot.com/2011/02/writer-spotlight-carrie-swearingen.html
[4] http://lemmondrops.blogspot.com/