

COMMUNITY SPORTS: VLC founder made a lasting impression

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Story teller. Fighter. Friend. Inspiration.

Those are just a few of the words that friends and loved ones used to describe Bill Kalenius, the founder of Vancouver Lake Crew, upon his death on Wednesday at the age of 57.

His death was not a big surprise. When he was diagnosed with colon cancer, Bill was told he had five years to live. That was six years ago next month.

Still, the idea that anything could stop William Kalenius III is difficult to believe.

His passion for rowing, and his belief that the sport has a unique power to enrich lives, drove him as — with help from many friends in the rowing community — he built the Vancouver Lake Crew program, which he founded in February of 2002.

I first met Bill when he came by the office that winter to ask for help getting the word out about Vancouver Lake Crew. Though I didn't know Bill well, I do know that a visit with him always lifted my spirits.

Even on days when the impact from the cancer or a treatment was visible in his features, his eyes always had a spark when he shared a story. That energy will live on through the rowing club that he brought to life.

Neither the cancer, nor the tornado in January 2008 that damaged most of the club's belongings, slowed Bill's drive.

"He never quit and he never took no for the answer," said friend Alan Stewart.

Back in 2002, Stewart helped Bill pitch the sport at area high schools. He is — at Bill's request — back at VLC as the head coach for the club's high school team and adult rowing program.

Nathan Drapala, a Columbia River High School senior who is starting his fourth year with the crew, called Bill Kalenius a hero and father figure.

"He's been such an important part of my life," Drapala said.

Rowing became central to Bill's life after he took up the sport in the early 1970s at Western Washington University — which this year honored him with its WWU Alumni Association Community Service Recognition Award.

As a competitor, his accomplishments included wins at some of the more prestigious events in North America. As a coach, and ambassador for the sport, he contributed to the success of clubs from Seattle to Portland.

Bill relished helping young people develop a skill and a passion for the sport he loved, but he was sparing with praise, Drapala noted.

"He didn't just shower you with compliments, and that made you work harder," he said. "When he did tell you nice job, it really meant something."

Not that Bill was the shy, retiring type.

"He was a great story teller, and in his stories were always something for the kids to take home," said Anita Roberts, the executive director of Vancouver Lake Crew and a close friend of Bill.

Though Bill seldom spoke of his health challenges, Roberts said he believed his competitive rowing background helped him battle the cancer.

"He told me all the training he did all those years — the pain of training and pushing him beyond his limits — helped him fight the cancer," she said.

The sad thing, longtime friend and Roger Payne said, is that it didn't have to happen this way. Three decades ago, Payne and Kalenius teamed to win championships at some of the most competitive events in North America.

"It's really sad to have something like this happen to someone who gave so much and had so much to give," Payne said

Himself a survivor of colon cancer that was detected early, Payne said he hopes Bill's fight inspires more of us older than 35 to get tested for colon cancer as part of regular physicals.

Thus, even in his death, we can learn from the life of Bill Kalenius. And that's appropriate.

Because his legacy lives in the boats of Vancouver Lake Crew and his spirit lives the strokes that propels rowers across the lake and toward productive, fulfilling lives of their own. And we are reminded that Bill Kalenius was, right to the end, a true mentor.