

From *Pollyanna* to Beloved Icon

JULIE ROHR'S LEGACY NOW INCLUDES A SCHOLARSHIP FOR STUDENTS WHO'VE LOST A PARENT TO CANCER

BY HELEN METELLA

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JULIE ROHR WAS JUST SIX years old when her baby brother, Jeremy, was born. There were two sisters between them, but suddenly Julie had found a calling.

"Julie took it upon herself to take care of Jeremy as much as possible ... to 'help' her parents do 'a good job' of raising him," says her father, Gary. "We often had to remind her that we were the parents."

As this "exuberant, positive, Pollyanna-type" grew to adulthood, whenever other people entered Rohr's orbit — via a fundraiser, her tweets and radio commentaries, or through her job as a manager of tenant relations — all experienced her brand of dedicated caring. Her gap-toothed smile spread sunshine, and her capacity to empathize and communicate with people from all walks of life was transcendent.

Rohr died on September 16, 2021, aged 39, after six years of fighting (and documenting) her battle with a rare cancer called leiomyosarcoma, which attacks smooth muscles in the body's hollow organs, such as the stomach and bladder. In her short life she perfected three superpowers: love, gratitude and how to command a room. ▶





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— RYAN JESPERSEN

“She would tap into those foundational principles of empathy and sincerity,” says Ryan Jespersen, host of the podcast, *Real Talk*. Rohr was a founding member of its editorial board and an occasional panellist who provided a thoughtful civilian perspective.

“I remember her speaking with so much common sense and breaking political issues down to be human issues,” Jespersen says. “The audience feedback when she was on would always be so marvellous.”

An avid reader and former reporter with the *Sherwood Park News*, Rohr had a gift for expressing herself clearly and precisely. As a toddler, she interacted charmingly with the teenagers her father guided as a youth pastor. She was reading long before kindergarten, and later honed her love of words while being home-schooled by her mother, Marlene. As a teen working with senior citizens, she developed direct language to be easily understood.

Her family’s Pentecostal faith, her pre-journalism studies at a Bible college and the robust discussion of current affairs around the family dinner table embedded compassion in Rohr. Stories of hardship told by her immigrant grandparents sowed her with remarkable gratitude and optimism.

“My mom was torn away from her village in Poland at age 10, with less than two hours to leave the country when Hitler invaded, and my parents came here as displaced persons who had to work the sugar beets,” Gary says. “My father was wounded in war and had to give up his education. Yet these people came out resilient and joyful. Julie, by hearing those stories in her formative years, even when she got cancer, she did not feel sorry for herself.”

Articles and videos she left behind bear that out. Repeatedly, she encourages people to find the good and to look for beautiful, poignant moments.

Her accomplishments support the view that numerous small, individual



efforts generate a lasting legacy: After her first marriage, Rohr instituted a weekly family night at her parents’ home for all who could attend. Since her death, her ex-husband has rejoined the suppers, along with their son, her second husband and his son, and her siblings. In 2013, she and her then-four-year-old son, Max, started the Fight A Monster campaign, raising almost \$13,000 by selling Max’s drawings of monsters. Half went to a family hit hard by cancer, half to leukemia research.

Rohr’s impact was multi-pronged: The Women Project was a photo exhibit she organized to raise money for women recovering from trauma including domestic violence, disease, failed relationships, self-esteem matters and other dark times in their lives. She promoted Wellspring Edmonton (a nonprofit that offers programs and services to cancer patients, their families and caregivers) and served on the board of Knight’s Cabin (which offers retreats for cancer patients). Days before entering the hospice, she delivered an on-air critique of what she felt was the Alberta government’s mismanagement of the pandemic and the harm it was causing. She ensured the Roozen Family Hospice Centre would be thanked publicly after her death, and

posthumously she was the face of the Alberta Cancer Foundation’s late 2021 fundraising.

To honour her, Jespersen and Rohr’s friends have established The Real Talk Julie Rohr Scholarship Fund through Edmonton Community Foundation.

Jespersen envisioned the \$5,000 annual award as a journalism scholarship, but while Rohr was in hospice she requested that it go to a student who had experienced what Max and her stepson, Jacob, were about to encounter — losing a parent to cancer.

Details will be released this March at ryanjespersen.com. The inaugural Real Talk Golf Classic runs June 23 at The Ranch Golf and Country Club, with a goal of raising \$100,000 for the scholarship. Her family has scheduled a public memorial at the Hawrelak Park Amphitheatre on June 20, the day after what would have been her 40th birthday. As a mark of how widely she was regarded, the Freewill Shakespeare Festival has made stage space available for the tribute.

“She was not a professional athlete, a celebrity or a musician, but everybody knows who she was,” says Jespersen. “I’ve only ever referred to somebody I’ve known personally as an icon once in my life—and it’s Julie.” ■