

## *Louise's Yarn*

For some people, knitting is an integral part of their family histories. My earliest memories of my mother include balls of wool, grey metal knitting needles and multicoloured threads gradually being worked into the shape of something warm and cozy. My paternal grandfather thrilled his eight grandchildren by making each of them a zippered, bulky sweater with skier patterns. They were his cure for arthritis and we were very proud to have a grandfather who could knit.

My friend Louise Roussel started knitting when she was 10. She learned from her British-born mother and as they sat together with needles and yarn, she heard stories about the socks and sweaters her mother had made for soldiers in the Second World War.

Most would-be knitters never get much past plain and purl – enough for a simple scarf or washcloth. Louise is one of those rare people whose knitting went from craft to art. She loved the challenge of seeing an unusual item and figuring out how to reproduce it with her own unique embellishments. She used her talent to create fashionable sweaters, hats and scarves for herself, her family and friends. Knitting helped calm her worries during her children's teen years, helped pass the time in waiting rooms and always ended in a satisfying product.

None of that changed when Louise was diagnosed with cancer in 2002. It began in the summer with a sore throat and trouble swallowing and, by the fall, she was diagnosed with throat cancer (no, she was not a smoker). Over the next year, she underwent chemotherapy, radiation treatments, brachytherapy (a procedure in which rice-sized pieces of radioactive material are placed against the tumour) and surgery to remove dead tissue. Nurses told her that cancers above the shoulders are the hardest to deal with – they are literally and psychologically 'in your face.'

Louise returned to work part time in the fall of 2003, but by mid-2004, it was clear that cancer wasn't leaving anytime soon. Tumours were found in her ovaries – often a fatal diagnosis – but Louise's fighting spirit took over. Her attitude now was that any cancer below the neck was

a walk in the park. More chemo, more radiation and she was on her way. But the cancer was persistent and now it encapsulates her liver and bladder. She knows her end is near, but she takes every moment as it comes and celebrates the fact that she has a supportive family, two beautiful daughters, four grandchildren and a partner who loves her dearly.

“Some days, it’s really hard just to get out of bed,” says Louise. “The drugs make me dopey and sometimes I wonder if it’s worth the effort. Then I remember that I’m the only person who can help me in this situation. People may care about me, but they can’t live for me. And besides, I want to really live every single moment I have left.”

Louise’s experience with chemo-induced baldness was her excuse to knit up a flurry of brightly-coloured cotton caps. As she perfected her pattern, she decided to bring her extras to the other patients at the Gynecology Oncology Clinic at the Ottawa Hospital General Campus. “It was such a pleasure seeing my hats on those bald heads and to hear how surprised and happy people were to receive something homemade, for free,” says Louise. With her propensity for buying too much yarn (every knitter’s temptation), she made and gave away about 100 hats.

In the summer of 2009, Louise’s doctors told her that time was running out. Hearing the finality in their voices, she started looking for homes for her belongings, including her large supply of yarn. Over the last 20 years, she had amassed enough to fill a small bedroom. Some of this material went to her daughter’s friend, then the friend of a friend, and then she listed her wool on-line – free for the taking. She got a call from the Ottawa Hospital Auxiliary asking for a donation, and the pile began to shrink. Louise laughs: “It was like, ‘Black sheep, black sheep, have you any wool?’”



*A sampling of Louise’s creations*

Louise had given her bead collection to her co-worker Melanie Burston, whose nieces Willow and Julian are talented young artists and craftspeople. Knowing Louise’s story, they rented a table at Churchill Alternative School’s craft fair and donated the revenues from their bead creation sales to the Canadian Cancer Society. Hearing that Churchill’s volunteer-run knitting club needed supplies, Louise decided to offer its members her remaining yarn. Melanie collected and delivered Louise’s gift to the school.

Churchill has had a knitting club since 2007. Club organizers match 50 to 70 children with volunteers, yarn and knitting and crocheting tools. “It’s often chaotic,” says club founder Petra Bokowski, “but the children eventually pick up the skills. Last year, some of our members knit squares that were sewn into a blanket for a fellow student that was sick with cancer.”

Long after Louise’s yarn is finished, the volunteers at Churchill will ensure that a new generation of knitters will carry forward an ancient and beautiful craft. Louise’s knitting has touched many people, weaving the sadness and loss of illness into the warm embrace of kind acts and memorable stories. As her co-workers at the Caledon Institute know, there is nothing plain about Louise – she is our pearl.

*Anne Makhoul*

*Louise Roussel was Office Manager of the Caledon Institute of Social Policy from 1994 to 2006. [Post-publication note: Louise passed away on April 14, 2010. Her spirit lives on.]*



*Louise on vacation in Key West, Florida in February 2009.*

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