

A Tribute to Doris Lowenthal

Doris Lived in Living Color

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When Doris Lowenthal was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis (PF) at 37, she really didn't understand what it meant. She certainly didn't realize it was a death sentence. In fact, even after suffering from PF for seven years, undergoing a single lung transplant in 2005 and having two bouts with breast cancer, the most recent earlier this year, Doris was not about to give up.

When most people receive a diagnosis as devastating as PF, they begin "dying" on that day. Not Doris. She spent her days living – and not just being alive and breathing – she lived in vivid color. Much like the makeup line she loved and sold, Mary Kay, colors were part of her life. You rarely saw Doris when she wasn't wearing something red, hot pink or another vibrant color. They had to compete only with the brightness of Doris' greenish brown eyes that twinkled as she spoke.

Doris received a single-lung transplant in 2005 but still had PF in her native lung. The disease which causes unrelenting scarring of the lung air sacs eventually destroys all of the lung tissue and is unstoppable and untreatable.

Weeks ago, Doris was on a flight headed for Dallas from Baltimore when she fell ill with a seizure. The pilots made an emergency landing in Memphis where she remained until her fight ended on Sunday, August 14, 2011.

She was in the ICU for more than three weeks. But, her spirit and determination didn't lie down. She spoke optimistically about overcoming the seizures that were likely the result of the many medications she was taking as a lung transplant patient. They could have also been related to the lingering effects of breast cancer treatment months earlier. She talked about the fungus that was attacking her lungs, aspergillus, and lamented that it had been treated too slowly for her tastes. She was pleasantly aggressive in everything – even and especially as a patient and being her own advocate.

Even through seemingly rib-breaking coughing, a symptom of PF, Doris would smile and go on with her animated stories there in her hospital room. She was passionate as she spoke about her husband and best friend, Barry, who flew to Memphis after his wife fell ill and was there every day during her ordeal. She joked to Barry that they'd finally made it to Memphis, a city that they'd talked frequently about finding time to visit. She wanted to be a tourist and go through Graceland and enjoy Beale Street. She also wanted to pay her respects to Dr. Martin Luther King who was killed in the city that claims itself as the birthplace of rock n' roll.

She talked about the month ahead when she would be out of the hospital and she and Barry would again join the Coalition for Pulmonary Fibrosis on Capitol Hill for National Pulmonary Fibrosis Awareness Week fighting for the more than 100,000 people suffering from the same disease that was still wreaking havoc on her native lung. She wanted to make sure Members of Congress supported the new PF bill – the Pulmonary Fibrosis Research Enhancement Act. As always, she'd use her charm, her beauty and her personal story to grip the hearts of legislators and their staffs and garner their co-sponsorship.

She complained about not being able to wear the ball gowns that were still neatly packed in her luggage –planned for events with Mary Kay headquarters that she'd missed weeks earlier. "Fabulous," she called them, and much more fun than the hospital gown she was wearing.

Ever the optimist along with her upbeat husband, Doris spoke highly of the doctors and nursing staff treating her there at Baptist Memorial Hospital. She considered her time there as a bit of an inconvenient second opinion but one that she thought would be good for her, overall.

Doris wanted others to know her story and to be inspired by it. She spoke publicly frequently about her illness with PF and made passionate pleas to others asking them to support efforts to eradicate the lethal lung disease. She knew the work she was doing wouldn't necessarily save or even extend her life. She did it for the others who suffered along with her and the ones who would suffer in the future.

Besides to sleep, Barry only left the hospital once. It was the night before she died – his brother and friend had driven from Atlanta to Memphis to be supportive of Barry since Doris had been sedated and placed on a ventilator days before. She'd suffered a cardiac arrest, as well, and needed the extra help breathing to recover. His brother could see how weary Barry was from weeks of being on watch for his wife. They convinced Barry that a night at the Memphis Redbirds baseball game would help ease his stress and relieve his caregiver tension. A St. Louis Cardinals fan, Barry reluctantly agreed that it would be good to see the minor league farm team, the only non-profit team in baseball.

When Barry arrived at Redbirds stadium and through the welcome gates, the first thing he saw was a Redbirds jersey with the organs of the body on it, including the lungs. It was a promotion for organ and tissue donation and Barry was wearing his bright green organ donor tee shirt, without knowing. It seemed somewhat serendipitous that the night would be dedicated to transplant patients (the Memphis-based Foundation for Transplants was there) while his lung transplant recipient wife lie in the hospital just minutes away.

At 1:30 a.m., hours after Barry returned to the hospital, his wife suffered another heart attack. Later the same morning, she suffered two more. They were simply too much for Doris' body.

Doris had plans to set up a Mary Kay lipstick promotion that would benefit the Coalition for Pulmonary Fibrosis. She had planned for it to run from National Pulmonary Fibrosis Awareness Week (Sept. 18-24) until after New Year's 2012 to accommodate the gift-giving season. "Who wouldn't want to buy a great shade of lipstick for a great cause?" she said weeks ago.

She hadn't yet chosen the lipstick color for the promotion. Odds are she'd have chosen one of her favorite shades. In all of her life's health challenges, Doris always wore lipstick. She felt beautiful and was beautiful. No doubt she's wearing a ball gown and her favorite shade of lipstick now.

Doris, your smile, your courage, your inspiration and your passion will be sorely missed.