

## For June, apathy was not an option

Apr 19, 2007

CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER



"I did it because it was the right thing to do."

With those simple words, June Callwood summed up her life of service. A few years ago we were on a quest to better understand what drives a person into a life devoted to others, so we paid a visit to Toronto's most compassionate resident.

Sitting together in a busy downtown restaurant, we asked June what motivated her. Was it religious belief? A personal philosophy? Maybe the death of her son Casey?

"No," she answered quickly. "There was a need and it was the right thing to do. No other reason."

She must have sensed our surprise at such a straightforward answer and went on to explain that she grew up in a small town outside of Windsor, a tight-knit community where everyone took care of one another. When someone was sick, neighbours brought food. When someone died, everyone came together.

June learned from a young age the value of reaching out.

Then she told us that moving to the big city was a kind of wake-up call for her. June was shocked by the poverty and homelessness she saw, but even more so by the fact that so few people were doing anything to help.

For June, apathy wasn't an option. She told us that all her social work was an extension of her childhood lesson – that community is like a big family and helping others is the right thing to do.

"When things are unfair, you have to do something," she said. "It's absolutely your responsibility."

We realized then that we were sitting in the presence of someone special.

Of course, June is a person who was ever present in all our lives. From her career in journalism and her 30 books to the more than 50 social organizations she helped found, June's advocacy was renowned.

But it wasn't until the day we met her when we truly learned that she didn't just do service work; she was the embodiment of it.

During her long career, June had been recognized dozens of times for her social action, from 16 honorary degrees to the Order of Canada. But those were all an afterthought to the work she felt was important.

"People do things because it's the right thing to do," she told us. "Not to be thanked or to get favours in return."



TORONTO STAR FILE  
June Callwood is seen in this file image  
from March 7, 2007.

June recalled a time when she was walking down a street and came across a man being beaten up. Instead of walking by, as any woman well past retirement age would be expected to do, she intervened.

"You stop that," she yelled. "That's bad behaviour!"

They stopped.

While we couldn't help but chuckle at the image of June – an older woman in a crisply ironed dress yelling in a motherly tone – we knew that it made perfect sense. Whenever someone needed help, June intervened on his or her behalf.

As we shared a laugh with her over this story, a man from the next table came over to us. Likely new to Canada, he had a thick foreign accent, and said he couldn't help overhear our conversation. He had never heard the name June Callwood.

"You sound like someone who likes to make a difference," he said to June. "I think that deserves to be applauded."

Here was a complete stranger, so inspired by what she had to say, that he felt compelled to congratulate her.

She thanked him with a genuine humility and wished him a good day.

With our lunch coming to a close, we asked June if she had any final thoughts for us. Her answer echoes in our memory to this day.

"In this life, you can't do everything you want to," she said. "But you should do everything you can do."

When cancer ended June's life last Saturday, humanity lost a friend.

All week we have been reading tributes to June and have been constantly reminded of the time we spent with her.

The sense of justice and fairness that stood out to us most is now what will form the core of her legacy.

Many of June's friends have said that she was not afraid of dying. She welcomed it with a kind of contentment – the kind you only get from living a full life.

June's imprint on Toronto will remain long after this week's headlines fade.

Every time an AIDS patient finds solace in a local hospice, she will be there. Every time a street kid finds safety in a hostel, she will be there. Every time a marginalized person has his voice heard, she will be there.

So thank you, June Callwood, for always doing what's right.

---

**Craig and Marc Kielburger** are founders of Free the Children and co-authors of *Me to We*.