

TRIBUTE TO COURAGE: GAYLE ROESSL 1956-1983

Editor's Note: The following tribute was written by Ian McCluskey, '82, whose wife, Gayle Roessl, died of cancer last year. A scholarship fund has been established in her name, and contributions are now being accepted.

It's true, I think, that each one of us needs a hero, someone to whom we can look for strength and guidance. Often, the people that we choose as examples are public figures whose accomplishments and successes we admire. At times, however, we need only look around us to find the real heroes in our lives. All those who have attended "Thunderbird" can take particular pride in one of our fellow Thunderbirds, who through her life has taught us a great deal about courage and determination. Shortly before her father died of cancer in 1974, a young girl copied these words into her journal:

There may be suffering, but no abiding hopelessness. No power, no imposition, no catastrophe can uproot the personal dignity of each human being.

On August 16, 1983, Gayle Frances Roessl died of cancer at the age of 27, but not before she had revealed to many the true meaning of the words that she had written in her notebook many years ago.

Throughout her short lifetime, Gayle had to face more pain and suffering, and more disappointment than most of us will ever have to endure in a full lifetime. When Gayle was 21 she experienced the first in a series of setbacks that were to test her strength and will to survive. Gayle underwent major brain surgery to remove a tumor which was discovered while Gayle was studying in Spain. Following months of convalescence, Gayle returned to the University of Minnesota to pick up where she had left off.

Two years later, at the age of 24, Gayle received another devastating shock—breast cancer. Following surgery and more than a year of regular visits to the hospital for chemotherapy, Gayle was ready to make another difficult comeback. In the fall of 1981 Gayle came to Thunderbird.

For each of us, arriving in Glendale, Arizona is the start of an adventure. For Gayle it was much more than that. It was a chance to make a new beginning, to leave behind, for a time, many painful memories. Thunderbird, for Gayle, was a time of new friendships, of discovery, of learning and laughter. For each of us Thunderbird is something special; for Gayle it was everything.

With surgery and chemotherapy behind her, Gayle charged ahead in the only way she knew how, with positive, unbridled enthusiasm. Although, on occasion, a little self-conscious in a bathing suit, Gayle displayed no more self-doubt than the rest of us who had also found ourselves in a new environment. Gayle forged ahead with her studies, with softball, biking and the pub. Her confidence fully restored, Gayle had little time to feel sorry for herself.

Although several of Gayle's close friends were aware that she had

cancer, there are many students that Gayle met during her time at Thunderbird who will be shocked to learn that, behind the smiles and laughter, Gayle was seriously ill. For the last thing that Gayle wanted was to be treated any differently. All that she asked was to be like everyone else.

Before the end of Gayle's second semester, in the spring of 1982, Gayle's problems reappeared, this time in her left hip. Although the pain she experienced made walking a difficult task, she assured herself and her friends that it was nothing serious. Despite the persistent discomfort, Gayle traveled to Guadalajara in June, her energies focused on making it through the summer semester. For all those who came to know Gayle at Thunderbird, they will recall that at times she could be a stubborn young woman. They will recognize the fighter in this story.

When the constant pain in her hip forced Gayle to leave Mexico, she returned to Thunderbird to find a letter from her oncologist. The tests had revealed what she most feared.

During that long summer in Minnesota, Gayle went through many painful and frightening days. More chemotherapy. More radiation. Her beautiful blond hair, sunbleached in Arizona, fell out in handfuls. All of this would have been enough to discourage even a saint. But, with the first glimmer of hope, Gayle was prepared, once again, to start all over, to embark upon a new adventure.

By the end of August Gayle's hip and spirits had both improved. Although she was somewhat self-conscious about her thin hair and loss of weight, those who attended the ceremony all agreed that she made a beautiful bride. Gayle delighted in sending her friends a tongue-in-cheek wedding announcement.

Gayle moved to Ottawa, Canada in September. She began making plans to return to Thunderbird. She had one more semester to complete and nothing, she was determined, was going to get in her way. It was then that Gayle decided that she had had enough of

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Gayle Roessl

chemotherapy, and living her life in and out of hospitals. Besides, she reasoned, it was too cold in Ottawa not to have any hair. And, of course, how could she go back to Thunderbird bald?

Against her doctor's wishes, Gayle declined any more treatments. She would try things her way, with the help of some caring people from whom she had learned about macrobiotics, a strict nutritional approach to dealing with disease, and other alternative cancer therapies. Through the winter Gayle regained her strength and, with it, a rekindled hope that she would, indeed, return to Thunderbird.

In March of 1983, with her hair sprouting thick and curly, Gayle flew off to the warmth of Arizona

to make arrangements for her return in the fall. Her visit to Thunderbird was a great victory, but the tests were to become increasingly more difficult.

Not long after her return from Arizona, triumphant and tanned, Gayle was struck down again. This time, the top two vertebrae in Gayle's neck had collapsed. She could not be moved without causing her great pain. Over the next three months every day was a test of resolve and courage. But each day that Gayle lived during that period was full of little victories. There was always a new goal to reach for, a ray of hope to be grasped at. And as always, there were smiles and laughter, hours of talking about special times at Thunderbird.

True to her stubborn character, Gayle refused to stay in hospital any longer than was absolutely necessary. She returned to her home in Ottawa, under her own steam up the stairs, triumphant again. Gayle died a few weeks later. She slipped away peacefully one evening in August. Throughout it all, there had been no bitterness nor complaining, only that some unswerving determination to keep going, never to look back.

Those same words that Gayle wrote into her journal as a young girl are now inscribed on a plaque by a tree that has been planted for Gayle at Thunderbird by her friends. A scholarship, too, has been established at Thunderbird in Gayle's name. Awards will be presented twice a year to students who qualify on the basis of financial need and academic merit. This scholarship represents another in a long series of triumphs in Gayle's life. Through her example and through the support of her fellow Thunderbirds many students will benefit in the years to come.

Any contribution to the Gayle Roessl Memorial Scholarship fund, no matter how small, would be greatly appreciated. Through this scholarship, Gayle's greatest dream, to return one day to Thunderbird, will be fulfilled.

Ian McCluskey
1981-82
Gayle's Husband