

Online, Saturday, June 2, 2007



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Velicer remembered as leader, inspiration

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By Liz Boardman/Independent Staff Writer

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SOUTH KINGSTOWN — In the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life,” Clarence tells George, “Each man’s life touches so many other lives. When he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?”

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That sentiment is hitting home in South Kingstown as the community mourns the sudden death of its friend, colleague and inspiration, Sue A. Velicer.

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“We suffer a great loss in her passing, not only because we lose a friend,” said Eileen Jones, of the Gift of Hearing Foundation in Narragansett, “but because South County loses one of its most ardent supporters and stalwart facilitators that it might ever see.”

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Velicer was a founding member of SK CARES (Connecting All Resources for Educational Support), the school volunteer agency, and the South Kingstown Education Foundation. She also founded the popular South County and Newport County Women’s Networks, which brought women together to make personal and business contacts, to learn and grow, and to raise funds for philanthropic organizations.

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She died Friday - her 52nd birthday - in a leap from the Jamestown-Verrazzano Bridge.

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“I miss her to tears,” said Cheryl McCarty, a friend who is now running both of the Women’s Networks. “The person who jumped wasn’t Sue. It wasn’t Sue’s mind; it wasn’t Sue’s spirit. Maybe I’m in denial, but I want her to be the person I knew, and will do anything to keep that spirit going.”

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University of Rhode Island psychology professor Lisa Harlow was one of Velicer’s closest friends. She knew what many did not, that Velicer was suffering from a “seemingly unmitigating depression for several months, as she had about five years ago as well.”

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“She tried very courageously to deal with her depression,” Harlow said. “I kept seeing improvements, but when I would reflect it back to her, she didn’t always seem like she believed that she was improving.”

Harlow never imagined her friend would choose to end the fight instead.

“Although she was in the best of care with medication, professional help and the beautiful and complete love and support of her husband, Wayne, and many, many friends,” Harlow said, “she apparently found it too difficult to endure the pain she was experiencing and must have felt hopeless to turn it around.”

During her struggle with depression, Velicer quietly stepped back from a host of activities. She resigned from the CARES board at its last meeting, and McCarty put together the last several meetings of the Women’s Networks.

According to State Police Capt. James Swanberg, on Friday morning Velicer pulled her minivan to the side of the Jamestown-Verrazzano Bridge, walked to the edge and jumped. Workers dismantling the old Jamestown Bridge were able to rescue her, and a

state trooper performed CPR, but they couldn't save her.

Velicer was pronounced dead at Newport Hospital.

While they know she will never be forgotten, her friends want to fill the void that's left behind. They strive to celebrate and pass on the way she lived - and her enormous impact on the community - rather than dwelling on the way she died.

"She was so high spirited, fun and full of life," said Joyce Wadbrook, a member of the South County Women's Network who works for Capital City Financial Corp. in East Providence.

Velicer had a gift for making everybody around her feel important, her friends said.

She projected a tireless persistence, optimism, courage and sense that everything was possible.

"If memories keep someone alive, Sue will be alive for a long time," said Kim McHugh, a real estate agent who knew Velicer from both the Women's Network and the Women's Club of South County. "I think that will be her legacy."

McCarty will continue the Women's Network and is dedicated to seeing it grow.

"The Women's Network still has a great turnout, but I realized people came because they liked Sue and the way she made them feel," McCarty said. "She had a way of convincing you that you were so good, [a community group] needed you," she added. "The next thing you knew, you were volunteering."

Through the Women's Network, the Women's Club of South County, CARES and the Education Foundation, Velicer tirelessly raised money for the schools, Big Sisters and the food bank and to send women in Mali to school.

Her friends plan to raise money to dedicate a bench on the bike path to her - because for so many, Velicer grew from a business contact to a friend as they took walks together on the bike path.

"Sue was known for her walks to talk about ideas," said School Committee member Maureen Cotter. "I could never say no to Sue. I'm not sure anyone could."

Others, inspired by her life, plan to continue her mission of helping others.

"She always had a focus, was always saving people when she was alive, and she will save people in death," said McCarty, who wants to help raise awareness of depression. "Too many people turn a blind eye to depression. They don't realize how much someone is hurting."

Velicer's husband, Wayne, and two sons, Scott and Clayton, have asked that donations in her honor be made to the South Kingstown Education Foundation, 307 Curtis Corner Road, Wakefield.

A memorial service led by the Rev. Betty Kornitzer of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County will be held at Christ the King Church, 180 Old North Road in Kingston, tomorrow at 10 a.m. Burial will be private.

"I can't think of anyone who has contributed more of themselves to the community at large than Sue," said Jones. "She worked tirelessly to improve the community in which we live, to bring people together, and to help this world be a better place. And I pray she knew she was a success."

Liz Boardman can be reached at boardman@scindependent.com.

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