

Cancer victim puts his experience on film

By Gary M. Cates
staff writer

"No man is an island."
— John Donne

If Donne's statement is true, then Bob Calola was a continent.

Calola gave of himself all his life, including giving to others in his death.

The 32-year-old former Plymouth Township firefighter died Wednesday in a Traverse City Hospital. He was a victim of cancer.

Yet, even in death, Bob overcame the cancer which claimed his stomach, spleen and bone marrow.

"In the last hour of this guy's life I saw hope, encouragement and power," said Connie Newell.

Newell and Calola were working on a movie exploring the devastating effects of cancer. The film features candid discussions Calola had with some Traverse City high school students.

Calola and his wife Beverly moved to Traverse City in December 1980. In August of 1982, he was told he had cancer of the stomach.

He underwent surgery and was released from the hospital. After the surgery, Calola and Newell decided to make the film.

"It is one guy's effort at sharing himself openly, allowing himself to be used to teach these kids. Any question they wanted to ask, he answered," Newell said.

Talking with students was something with which Bob was familiar. During his eight years as a township firefighter, he frequently paid visits to Plymouth-Canton Community Schools.

"He was well known in the schools here. He put on CPR classes and fire career talks," said Township Fire Chief Larry Groth.

"He loved the kids and they wanted him back — it's obvious by the letters we received," Groth said.

Calola planned to film four sessions with the Traverse City students. Each of the sessions was to deal with an aspect of Bob's realization of cancer — physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

"What we've got on film right now is two sessions in the high school," said Newell, a chemotherapy nurse at Osteopathic Hospital in Traverse City.

"In the first one Bob looked great. He talked about 'What's cancer?' There were a lot of laughs, a lot of horsing around, and a lot of good questions from the kids," Newell said.

The need for chemotherapy postponed the second filming. The high-school students learned of the uncertainty in a cancer victim's life as they waited for the second filming.

"I wanted the kids to understand that's the life of a cancer victim. We would plan something and God would say, 'No, not today,'" Newell said.

Bob was a spiritual man who used prayer

as one method of dealing with his disease, said Newell.

"I think Bob needed to do something creative with death, rather than letting it be a downer."

There was something in Bob that said this message was God's — there's something being done here that was bigger than him and he was just an instrument. God changed the plans so many times," Newell said.

Five days after the intense therapy sessions, Calola returned to the school. He was weaker and showing the effects of the disease which was slowly conquering his body.

The session dealt with the emotional effects of cancer and death.

"God said if you're going to talk about emotions, we're going to show some," Newell said.

While there were some light-hearted moments, the session was tense. Bob cried at some points, at other points he sat in complete silence. Sweat dripped from his brow as he spoke.

The students probed the thoughts of a man facing death.

Just two weeks before his death, Bob talked with a reporter from the Traverse City

Record Eagle. He told the reporter about himself and the film.

"Most of the questions had to do with death — probably because that's what I looked like," he said in the article.

"You have to have fun with this. It's no big, last scene with the violins playing," Calola told the reporter.

"I don't see myself as being courageous at all. If I can help one person get out of the hospital as fast as I did or if I can help one person hang on another day longer, then the whole project will be worthwhile," he said.

Bob said cancer was a positive step in his life.

"I feel a little bit better about myself now. I seem to be able to go out of my way to give someone a smile," he said. "It's a better quality of life."

A deteriorating condition sent Bob to University Hospital in Ann Arbor shortly after the second filming.

The doctors told Calola they couldn't do anymore for him. He was sent back to the Traverse City hospital, Newell said.

Calola was scheduled to go home the day he died.

"He was high on going home. He put the

emphasis on going home," Newell said of her last visit with Bob.

"He said to me, 'Connie, I'm going home today.' Then a couple minutes later he told me again."

"I thought he was forgetting he already told me — because of the medication. I think he knew he was really going home," Newell said.

Bob's wife and mother were in the hospital room when he died.

"He leaned back and said 'I love you, goodbye,'" Newell said. "He did it with a lot of class. That was the message of his film, to other cancer victims, do it with class."

Calola's film is at a standstill — not because of his death, but due to a lack of funds.

"We need \$5,000 to complete the film," said Newell.

A Bob Calola Memorial Fund has been started in the Plymouth-Canton community. The donations will be used for completion of Calola's final project.

Monies can be sent to 935 Hartsough Court, Plymouth. Inquiries about the fund can be directed to Sandy Groth, 459-8512, or Paul Ralney, 453-8585.

"He was high on going home. He put the

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