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Lynda Callon, a force on Kansas City's West Side, dies

BY MARY SANCHEZ - THE KANSAS CITY STAR

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Lynda Callon FILE PHOTO BY RICH SUGG/THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Powerful is the life whose last breaths draw together police, politicians, philanthropists, migrant laborers and people whose names are little known outside their own small circles.

All day Sunday, people streamed into the hospital room of Lynda Callon, the force behind the West Side CAN Center. Callon died Sunday at University of Kansas Hospital. Hers was a horribly fast death to cancer that was diagnosed in late September as uterine but quickly spread to her lungs.

Caustic and challenging in her approach, Callon probably ruffled as many feathers as she made allies through the years. She was unrelenting in ensuring that CAN — Community Action Network — would succeed. And it did, receiving national acclaim.

The West Side center serves as a resource for Latino day laborers, as an office for two Kansas City police officers, as a link to city services and as an organizer of events for the community.

Callon was the director, a position that paid her a low wage and sometimes not at all, when funding was especially tight.

She didn't seem to care. Her passions were at their peak when advocating for the dozens of workers — many of them migrants from Mexico or Central America — who stop there daily this time of the year. They can get a meal, wash their clothes and wait nearby under a highway overpass for work.

The center is 20 years old this month, a remnant of initial community policing efforts aimed at putting officers in neighborhoods.

In 2002, Callon thought the center could also be used to combat the loitering and drunkenness that was a problem with some of the migrant men who hung around Southwest Boulevard. The area under the freeway overpass could be a place where the men could stand and be hired for work. Callon instituted a tough-love approach that wouldn't tolerate horseplay, drinking, any bad behavior. Soon the men began to police themselves, intolerant of anyone who broke Callon's rules.

Callon became a surrogate mother to many of the men. More than a few credit her with saving their lives. Several said it was only through Callon's encouragement and pushing that they became sober men, reliable workers.

Some called her "La Reina," the queen — because you never want to upset the queen.

"Her sole focus was helping the poor," said Matt Tomasic, one of the two Kansas City police officers who worked alongside Callon.

Tomasic said he learned unconditional love from Callon. He said she was like a mentor to him. The other officer, Octavio "Chato" Villalobos, concurred.

"She taught how to see the humanity of people, to look past the fact that they live under the bridge," Tomasic said.

Her brother Jim Callon arrived Sunday from Ottawa, Canada.

Although he hadn't seen his sister in 25 years, he said the details of his sister's work were not a surprise.

Lynda Callon was born in Canada, but the family moved to the Wichita area in the late 1960s because one son was mentally disabled and needed help with speech.

She learned firsthand about poverty at a young age. The family's father died at 29 of a heart attack, Jim Callon said.

Lynda was only 6, with three younger brothers. Their mother began working day and night jobs. Lynda took on the role of head of the household.

The family often didn't have much food. Callon's brother recalled having a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers donated by neighbors. Deliverymen would leave bottles of milk that would be written off as "breakage."

The family's ancestors were from Ireland, and Callon said his sister often had to break up fights between the boys, like "fighting Irish."

"She was the peacekeeper in the family," he said.

Her mother also died of cancer, in 1987.

Jim Callon said that when he learned Saturday of his sister's grave condition, he thought he'd take her home back to Canada. But there wasn't time. And he soon learned that his sister was surrounded by people in Kansas City who considered her family.

"I don't think they would have let me take her," he said with a smile. "I very much respect the community that she's made here."

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MEMORIAL

A gathering in Callon's honor will be held Friday at the CAN Center, 2130 Jefferson St. Friends can gather at 10 a.m., a memorial celebration will be at 11 a.m., followed by a fiesta luncheon of a roasted pig.