

EULOGY FOR MARY LOU MATTEUCCI (1957-2024)
FORMER OSSTF D21 OCTU PRESIDENT (2006-2015)
Given by Lyla Miklos at Mary Lou's Funeral Service
Tue, Jan 16, 2024

Hello.

My name is Lyla Miklos. I have been a member of the Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation, District Twenty-One, Office Clerical Technical Unit (OSSTF D21 OCTU) and an employee of the Hamilton Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) since 2009.

Yes. I can't believe it's been 15 years now either.

I have had the joy, privilege, and honour of calling Mary Lou my comrade, my mentor and my friend.

She was the President of my Union Local, OSSTF D21 OCTU, from 2006 to 2015. Since the tragic news of her passing started to spread around the halls of the schools and offices of the HWDSB my fellow OCTU members have been sharing their stories and memories of her with me.

Overwhelmingly she is remembered with deep respect and pride by OCTU members. She was a force who knew what the assignment was as our OCTU President and always stayed on mission. Going to bat for our members and fighting like hell for us.

Former D21 OCTU member Linda Holdsworth wrote to me: "She was always there for me. Never made me feel she was not supporting me. Always made me feel good about my work. Never made me feel unimportant. Amazing, caring, honest woman."

Former D21 OCTU member Lori Millar Johnston wrote to me: "I loved her instantly, she was welcoming, strong and so funny."

I remember working at an HWDSB High School when a new software system was being launched by the School Board that was going to cause a lot of chaos for everyone involved.

I checked in with the teachers bargaining unit leadership from my union local to have a plan in place that they were all OK with to help us ease into this transition. They all gave me a thumbs up. I told the Principal what the plan was and that D21 Teachers agreed to it.

The Principal then didn't implement the plan, lied about why and created a big mess. I called up Mary Lou and told her what happened. Moments later the Principal's phone rang. It was Mary Lou. The Principal shut their door to talk in private. It didn't matter. I could hear Mary Lou reaming them out and dressing them down through their closed door. Over the phone!

The Principal then sheepishly came out of their office, tail between their legs, barely able to look me in the eye, and APOLOGIZED for lying to me and told me to go forward with the plan that I had already organized and got union approval on.

Go Mary Lou! I'm not worthy! I'm not worthy!

From the moment I started working for the School Board and became an OCTU member Mary Lou was trying to recruit me to join the OCTU Council. I told her to at least wait until I have a Full Time Permanent job and wasn't just an on-call casual before I took on a Union Leadership role. Prior to working in public education, I used to work in television broadcasting and was a Union Stewart for CEP Local 723M when I worked for CHUM Television. Little did I know just how long the process of going from casual to perm at the school board would be! My fellow unionized HWDSB workers in the room know exactly what I'm talking about.

Once I joined OCTU's Council various leadership roles followed including D21 Political Action Committee Chair, OSSTF Rep on the OFL's Pride and Solidarity Committee, OCTU Chief Negotiator and OSSTF Equity Advisory Working Group Member.

Mary Lou was there with me for a lot of that ride, often times quite literally, as I still don't have a driver's license or own a car.

We had many conversations in her car about work, life, politics, and family over trips to meetings, conventions, conferences, training sessions, rallies, strikes and more.

Mary Lou did NOT suffer fools and our conversations were always opinionated and unfiltered.

Current OSSTF Provincial President Karen Littlewood shared: "I'm gutted. Mary Lou was the epitome of a spitfire with the most magnificent potty mouth to boot! I knew if there was a rally Mary Lou would be there. She'd be swearing up a storm, hanging with Dan Staples and staying until the end. She was totally committed to fighting for public education and certainly was one of a kind. You will not be forgotten."

When Mary Lou stepped down as OCTU President and retired in 2015 her shakes that all of us on OCTU Council and Executive had become very familiar with had become even more prominent. Mary Lou went on a medical journey to find a solution. At one point she was on some meds that resulted in her shakes almost completely disappearing. She came back to work for the Board as an on-call casual clerical. Sadly, her casual stint was short lived. Her shakes came back. Her doctors did a reassessment which eventually led to a very dangerous spinal cord surgery.

I remember coming to visit her in the hospital after her surgery and despite her weight dropping to frightening levels she was as Mary Lou as ever, wanting to hear all the gossip from OSSTF and the HWDSB and letting the F bombs fly fast and free from her mouth throughout.

Sadly, Mary Lou's body was never the same after that surgery and she never regained the mobility and independence she once used to have, but despite it all she still managed to keep her sense of humour.

Former OSSTF Provincial VP and D25 President Cindy Dubue shared with me a message Mary Lou sent her during this time: "I love your hair. I talked three women into growing their natural hair colour. Then I went and got highlights. LOL. Well, mine is all natural and I am lucky I only have a few gray hairs. The rest of my body is shit but, I don't have gray hair."

Mary Lou also had a big heart. Only months after I finally got my very first permanent position with the HWDSB I was frustratingly bumped from my role. There were no other OCTU positions available to immediately put me into, which meant I would be out of work for over two months.

She immediately got the paperwork filled out and sent off to OSSTF's provincial office so I could receive an emergency bursary from my union to help get me over the hump. Thank you, Mary Lou, and OSSTF!

Former OSSTF D21 PSSP Chief Negotiator Monica Knott shared a story with me about Mary Lou that exemplifies her kindness as well as her ability to not judge a situation without asking questions.

Monica was to attend the last provincial council meeting before the summer break, but at the time her Mother-In-Law was in palliative care and coming to the end of her illness. Monica reached out to other D21 members at their monthly council meeting to ask if someone else could be prepared to fill in for her.

Mary Lou was not at the meeting when this discussion happened. Tragically, Monica's Mother-in-Law passed away on the day of provincial council and an OCTU member who had volunteered to cover went to the meeting in her place.

A couple of weeks later, Monica heard that Mary Lou was mad that she missed the meeting, but being Mary Lou, she left Monica a message asking her to explain her absence first. With great trepidation Monica called her back. Once Monica told her that her mother-in-law had died that morning ... Mary Lou's anger dissipated, and her emotional energy was immediately redirected at concern for Monica and her husband Joe. She just wanted to know how they were doing and expressed a real empathy for their loss.

Monica wrote to me that "Mary Lou knew what was important and would not be petty. She had a fierceness about what was right. She could be rather mighty despite her small size. But when she knew someone was in pain or had a loss, her heart was what became fierce and mighty."

Chantal Mancini, former OSSTF D21 Teachers Unit President wrote: "Mary Lou was fierce, kind, tireless and funny. A heart of gold. Smart as hell (though I often had to remind her of that.) Tough. We had many laughs working together. She was a true unionist who cared about the people she served and would go to the wall for them. One minute she'd be on a picket line supporting workers, the next she was volunteering her time answering children's letters to Santa for Canada Post. But her true loves were her family—she spoke about you all with such love and pride."

Anthony Marco, President of the Hamilton & District Labour Council shared: "I worked with her in the OSSTF D21 office for many years and there were too many good times, discussions over lunches, and shows of solidarity to list! Rest in solidarity Sister!"

Patty Jarvis Coates, OSSTF member and the first Woman to be elected President of the Ontario Federation of Labour shared these memories with me: "Mary Lou was an amazing strong woman. I have so many great memories from her union days. Mary Lou always found a way to make us laugh. We always knew that Mary Lou would "tell it like it is". She never minced words. She was loyal to the sisterhood of women support staff presidents. For a number of years, she would host a girls weekend at her cottage on Star Lake. We would have so much fun. Everyone would contribute to the food and beverages - she would have her hubby take us out on the boat for a tour around the lake. Some of us would even take part in cliff jumping."

Thank you to everyone who shared their Mary Lou stories with me so I can share them with all of you here today.

This now marks two years in a row that there was a Christmas where I had meant to pay a visit to a sick friend and didn't and then at the start of the new year I hear the horrible news that they have passed before I could say goodbye.

Let that be a reminder to me and to all of us that life is short, and we should take every opportunity we can to tell the ones we love how much they mean to us when they are still here to appreciate it.

Mary Lou.

You always had my back.

You were one of my biggest fans, allies, and advocates.

I am a better person for having known you.

Joe, Diana, Robert, Debbie, Joseph, Erin, Dan, Tony, Susan, Maria and Tony thank you for sharing her with all of us.

Malone your Grandma loved you to bits and I hope your DNA is embedded with the spunk and spark and smarts she brought into this world.

I'll end with words from the feminist labour anthem Bread and Roses.

*As we go marching, marching,
un-numbered women dead
Go crying through our singing
their ancient cry for bread
Small art and love and beauty
their trudging spirits knew
Yes, it is bread we fight for,
but we fight for roses, too*