

Leukemia victim LaBarbera passes

By GWEN ALBERS
Managing Editor

Maria LaBarbera survived breast cancer only to get leukemia that left her nearly blind and deaf.

Known for standing up for her beliefs and making an impact on the community, Maria's suffering ended at 1:10 a.m. Saturday. As her three children slept, she passed away at her Naples home with her husband, Ken, by her side.

Maria's death fell on the 16th anniversary of the couple's move into their 16-by-16-foot home, built in 10 days without electricity or water to start their new life in North Idaho. They came here from Long Island, N.Y., looking for an affordable place to raise a family.

The home and family grew. Maria leaves behind daughter Lorena, 14, and sons Peter, 11, and Basil, 8.

A time to remember Maria will be held at noon Saturday, Nov. 22, at Naples Inn.

As hard as it is, Ken LaBarbera finds some relief in his wife's death.

"She was being taken over by the cancer," he said. "She lost her sight in one eye due to a brain tumor. She lost hearing from one ear and days later, she lost the hearing in the other. Your body knows when it's over."

Family friend Laura Kitchen called Maria's death as an enormous loss.

"She was exuberant," said Kitchen, who met Maria 16 years ago while living in Naples. "She had such a joy for life and such a passion for everything."

A member of Boundary County School District's Board of Trustees, she will be missed.

"She was a real quality person, who really thought things through," said Superintendent Dr. Don Bartling. "She ended

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up supporting schools very strongly and was an inspiration to me."

Friend Ingrid Pavia referred to Maria as a woman who always used diligence when searching for answers, especially when it came to school issues.

"She knew everyone and I happened to be one of the people she asked to do some research," Pavia said.

She was devastated at

hearing about Maria's death.

"My first thoughts were for Ken and the children," Pavia said. "My next thought was about the community she left behind and the voice that a lot of people will miss."

Maria was born Oct. 5, 1958, on the Azores Islands 600 miles off the coast of Portugal. She was the second oldest of 16 children.

Maria was born on a volcanic island, where flowers grow bigger than most, Ken said.

She was given the middle name Rose.

"If there was every a volcanic Rose, it was her," Ken said. "She was beautiful. She was a rose for a lack of a better word to describe her."

After Maria's mother suffered a mentally debilitating accident, her father could not take care of all the children. A doctor in the military adopted her and five of her siblings.

Maria was raised in Long Island, where she remained after meeting Ken. When they decided to have a family, the couple wanted to leave Long Island.

They tried Florida, but chose North Idaho. They spotted a sign on a steep Trail Creek Road hillside for 9.2 acres.

"We bought it on Nov. 5, 1992, started building, and in 10 days, we moved in," Ken said. "She loved it here. It was perfect. It was her dream."

Maria in 2006 was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was treated with chemotherapy.

Earlier this year, Maria was diagnosed with acute leukemia with chromosomal markings known to be consistent with leukemia resulting from chemotherapy for breast cancer.

In a letter she wrote to The Herald last summer, Maria said, "It is likely therefore that, indeed, the chemotherapy I was given for breast cancer played a causative role in the later occurrence and diagnosis of acute leukemia."

Maria Rose LaBarbera, 50

Editor's Note: Maria Rose LaBarbera, 50, of Naples did not want a traditional obituary so she wrote her own one month before she passed away on Saturday, Nov. 15.

I came from a family of 16 children. I was born in Azores, Portugal, and came to

live in the United States when I was 6 years old.

After relocating, Ken and I started a family. Ken, Lorena, Peter and Basil are the jewels in my crown. Motherhood defines me — a rewarding vocation.

Our family wishes to extend our heartfelt thanks to

the generous charity offered to us in our time of need.

I ask, that instead of memorial contributions and donations, that each and every one of you invest in the future of your own children. Pay a visit to financial advisor Kevin Callos or Eileen Keller at Edward Jones, 6797

Eisenhower St., Bonners Ferry, or call the office at 267-5664.

Make a difference to better the lives of your future — your children.

Pray for one another.

A memorial service will be held at noon Saturday, Nov. 22, at Naples Inn for Maria.