Joann Downing remembered for fighting for all human rights

by Jim Larkin | Flint Journal contributing writer

Friday January 16, 2009, 9:44 AM

FLINT, Michigan -- It wasn't just that Joann Downing fought for the rights of some people that amazed those who knew her best.

It was that she fought for the rights of all people -- including lesbians and gays, women and people of various racial backgrounds -- and did so insistently and without regard for herself that they found remarkable.

And it is the loss of that human rights warrior that they say they will miss. Downing, 53, formerly of Grand Blanc, died Jan. 7 at McLaren Medical Center after more than a decade battle with cancer.

A funeral service was held Sunday.

"What a fighter she was and how much of her life she devoted to others," added longtime friend Debbie Hillebrand of Whitmore Lake. "She just pushed and pushed and pushed. It was amazing. I don't know where it all came from."

Jack LeSage, who was once co-chair with Downing of the Out 'N About program in Flint, called Downing "tremendously active" for human rights and said she went through leadership training in interracial relations.

"She was probably one of the most observant people I know as far as people's rights being violated -- and not just (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) rights, but also women's rights and racial rights," LeSage said.

Downing had a mastectomy and bone marrow transplant in the late 1990s, only to have a recurrence in August 2007 and more recently have it spread into her spinal column. She worked
as long as she could as development director of the Greater Flint Arts Council, Hillebrad said, but was recently confined to her home until she went into McLaren on Dec. 23.

Downing, who grew up in the Grand Blanc area, spent all her career in nonprofits after graduating from Grand Blanc High School and Michigan State University with a degree in recreation and youth leadership.

She also worked for Big Brothers, Big Sisters; the Girl Scouts Fair Winds Council; and YWCA of Metropolitan Detroit. She spent 22 years with the Girl Scouts Fair Winds Council, finishing as properties and outdoor program director.

But she was also very involved in the community, serving on the Flint Human Relations Commission, Genesee County Gender Equality Committee, and as one of the driving forces behind Out 'N About, a yearlong celebration of LGBT contributions to the arts.

"I just believe in social justice for all people ... that everyone deserves a fair shake," Downing said in a July 2008 interview with Between the Lines newspaper.

"No one wants to be a bigot, but you have to help each other to see the bigotry. We all must become allies. We need to stand together."

Karen Downing, 51, of Dexter said her sister was always concerned about the rights of others and became involved in feminist issues when she was in college.

"I think the seed was planted when we were kids," Karen Downing said. "Joann always marched to her own drummer. She had her own way of seeing the world and she often convinced other people of her way.

"She cared so much for other people and making sure things are right."

LeSage credited her with getting a $50,000 ARCUS Foundation grant that allowed Out 'N About to function and Hillebrand said she was able to get a grant that allowed BANG, an all-girl percussion ensemble, to perform in the area for several years. She also was one of the community producers of "Face the Music," a lesbian/feminist radio show that aired on public station WFBE for 15 years.

Late last year she became too ill to leave her second-floor apartment but continued trying to do her work as development director of the Greater Flint Arts Council from her couch, said Hillebrand.

"She just never gave up," Hillebrand said.

Added LeSage, "She was just a terrific individual to know."

She leaves her father, Kenneth; sisters, Karen Downing, Michelle Wright, Suzanne McVey and brother, Kenneth II.
Donations are being made to the American Cancer Society and the Greater Flint Arts Council.