

Friends, family and colleagues salute 'a beautiful soul'

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By Susan Pigg
Tortier Network

St. James Cathedral was full of love and laughter, song and celebration Saturday as more than 500 beloved friends – both two-legged and four-legged – said goodbye to an extraordinary woman who first touched hearts at the age of just 18.

Barbara Turnbull, the young store clerk turned advocate for spinal cord research, organ donation and people with disabilities – an inspiration to thousands who'd never even met her – was summed up best at her funeral Saturday by her world-renowned neurosurgeon.

"You were the bravest person I ever met," Dr. Charles Tator said in a touching eulogy, written as if his long-time patient and good friend was listening as usual, to his every word.

"You were disconnected from your body, and yet you moved forward as if you were whole, and indeed you were."



Tator was the neurosurgeon on call Sept. 23, 1983, when Turnbull, then just 18, was shot in the neck during a robbery at a Mississauga Becker's. The shooting left her a quadriplegic.

But it also helped transform Turnbull, who would go on to become a *Toronto Star* reporter, into an unstoppable force for change – whether it was improving access for disabled movie-goers or raising hundreds of thousands of dollars through her Barbara Turnbull Foundation for Spinal Cord Research.

Turnbull, 50, died May 10 of complications related to pneumonia.

Lynn Turnbull and Christine Mortimer remembered their sister as a kid who loved to sing and take stairs two at a time, and who remained strong in her resolve to live that way, despite obstacles that would have felled so many others.

"Her sheer presence reminded us that the human can overcome the worst adversity," former Ontario lieutenant governor David Onley told the crowd, calling Turnbull "a great Canadian who was the epitome of courage and grace."

"She was part of who we are as a community, and we all knew we were better for it. Few people achieve that status."

Former *Star* managing editor Mary

Deanne Shears recalled first meeting Turnbull at her Mississauga home over Christmas of 1988. Turnbull was in her final year of the journalism program at Arizona State University – she would be chosen as valedictorian – and Shears was there "with orders to hire her."

Turnbull was in the kitchen, turning the pages of a book with her mouth stick.

"How will we ever make this work?" Shears wondered to herself, she told the crowd. "Those were the dark days of technology. You needed to press two buttons to operate a tape recorder."

But solutions were found, and Turnbull made the most of each of them to write some 1,200 stories in her exceptional career. They ranged from her crusade to save Bob the Crow, a schoolyard pest slated for execution by police, to her highly personal take on the benefits of medical marijuana, which she used to control muscle spasms.

Through her eloquence and determination, she helped save lives, by boosting awareness of the desperate need for organ donations.

Turnbull not only interviewed people, she inspired them, and went on to become good friends with many of her subjects, from former Ontario attorney general Roy McMurtry to the late poet Maya Angelou, whom she introduced three times as part of the Unique Lives and Experiences lecture series at Roy Thomson Hall.

Tator, who operated on Turnbull the night she was wheeled into the emergency room, became a close friend over the subsequent years, which for Turnbull included many health challenges.

"We all breathed a sigh of relief and accomplishment at your recent, 50th selfie birthday party," he said of the spinal cord research fundraiser Turnbull organized for herself on Feb. 7 at the Rivoli.

"Your brain contained a beautiful soul," Tator said. "You had empathy for others. Even when lying in a hospital bed, recovering from a catastrophic injury and paralyzed from your neck down, you were able to communicate, soul to soul, with those around you. You performed incredible magic with your brain after it was tragically disconnected from your body."