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Catherine Jolivet's legacy in the service of French culture

By Sophie Braccini



Photo provided

She was known simply as "Madame" to her students and their parents. Catherine Jolivet, a quintessential French woman who created and ran the French immersion school "French For Fun", recently died of cancer. Her family and friends organized a celebration of her life and legacy on Jan. 27 in Lafayette that highlighted the uncommon impact the woman had on her community.

Over 100 people of all ages came to the Lafayette Community Center where the gathering was held. "She was a life force and an amazing teacher," "she changed my life," "she taught us so much more than language," "she knew how to bend the rules when her students needed it," "she believed in children and their abilities." Those were a few of the comments made by parents and former students during the moving ceremony organized by Jolivet's son Robert Johnson for those who had loved Madame.

The crowd chatted mostly in English, but French words and expression peppered conversations recalling some 35 years of memories.

Jolivet had come to the United States in the 1980s with only her passion for teaching and a child in tow. The beginnings were hard, and her second child told the surprised crowd that the future successful business woman started her life in the United States on food stamps.

The school was established in the 1990s and generations of children were educated by her, starting at just a few months of age. Even before total language immersion for small children became a proven benefit for childhood development, she started programs for very little ones where all they heard was French, in the form of stories, games, songs, acting, etc. As some of her former students recalled, she was about hands-on and multidimensional learning.

One former student explained that she believes that becoming bilingual as a preschooler was the reason

why she is now a successful college student who speaks four different languages.

Testimony after testimony, a picture emerged of a fair, passionate and very direct woman, who called a spade a spade and that parents and their children could trust. One young woman explained how Jolivet literally saved her life in the metro in Paris when an evil person pushed her out of the metro car onto the platform as doors closed for departure. "Madame forcefully pried the doors opened and retrieved me," remembered the grateful young woman.

Many talked about how Jolivet opened the hearts of the children to another country, another way of life and expanded their world vision from a very young age. Many traveled to France, with or without her and shared stories.

Parents and former students, sometimes together, followed one another to the microphone to express a mix of gratitude and sorrow.

But Jolivet was also a woman with tremendous will that confronted many difficulties in her life, from changing legislation that threatened her school, construction issues that forced her to move several times her Lafayette business, a difficult divorce, and finally a terrible battle with cancer that she fought until the end. One mother who visited her in Los Angeles where she moved for her last months to be close to her sons, recalled how she humanely talked about death with her and her daughter, giving a final lesson about the cycle of life.

In Lafayette Jolivet had been a strong supporter of the Chamber of Commerce, and Executive Director Jay Lifson says that "Madame Catherine" had a special spot in his heart, adding that her energy was boundless and her ability to connect people was remarkable. He says that he had the pleasure of working with her on re-establishing the Langeac Society, Lafayette's sister city program with the village in France where the Marquis de la Fayette grew up. Jolivet spent her summer vacation in the French area of Auvergne where the city is set in 2015 and started to renew the ties between the two entities. Lafayette now needs to find a new "Madame" to pick up where she left off; it will not be easy.

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