

Community activist Colleen Smidt dies at 48

Served on county, school district committees; wrote column for Bremerton Patriot and Central Kitsap Reporter

By Leslie Kelly

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Colleen Smidt

BREMERTON — A week never went by when, either a community meeting or on Facebook or in person, Colleen Smidt wasn't addressing a local issue.

Smidt, a county advisory committee member and former columnist for the Bremerton Patriot and Central Kitsap Reporter, died Dec. 7 at work at Action Training Systems in Poulsbo. An autopsy was being conducted early this week, but an aneurysm is suspected.

She was 48. Her family plans a public celebration of her life in January.

Known for her wit and her straight-forwardness in tackling local issues, Smidt was active in just about anything and everything Bremerton. In fact, that was her column title — “Everything Bremerton” — when she wrote for the Reporter and Patriot from 2010-15.

Smidt was a member of the county Mental Health, Chemical Dependency and Therapeutic Court Citizens Advisory Committee, which determines how best to invest Kitsap County's mental health sales tax revenue. She was the at-large member from District 3 and was appointed by County Commissioner Ed Wolfe. She attended most Bremerton School Board meetings. Improving education in Bremerton was a primary focus for her; her son, Nick, is a junior at Bremerton High School.

In May 2015, she filed as a candidate for Bremerton School Board, but later opted to be a watch dog from the audience. Other public service: the Bremerton School District Finance Committee, the Bremerton School

District Superintendent Search Task Force, and the Kitsap County Budget Review Committee.

When her column marked one year, she wrote: “Everything Bremerton celebrated its first anniversary Feb. 5, the first time the column was published in these pages. For an entire year I have had the very unique pleasure and privilege of writing about myself, my family, my community and at times about many of you. I am having a great time doing it. In fact I really hesitate to call it a labor of love because rarely is it a labor at all. It is mainly my passion for this community that pours out of me and somehow gets committed to print on a weekly basis.”

Her columns addressed serious issues, like downtown parking, safety in schools, open government, and how tax dollars were being spent.

But she also wrote about life — her husband’s love affair with his motorcycle, a NASCAR weekend in Las Vegas, and using olive oil to get the family dog, Baer, out of a twisted chain, and ultimately having the call the fire department for help.

In April 2015, Smidt signed off from writing columns because she said she wanted to devote her time to volunteer efforts in the community.

In her last column, she thanked her husband, Jason, and son, Nick for giving her the time to write. “It has been a privilege that I have always tried to be mindful of and one that few individuals like I get to experience at this level. And most of all, I want to thank you Bremerton. You have amazed me, educated me, frustrated me, made me cry and made me love you even more during the course of this wonderful journey.”

Smidt thought of resurrecting her column in 2016, but she was appointed to the mental health citizens advisory committee and decided she didn’t have time for both. However, she frequently wrote letters to the editor.

Bremerton Mayor Patty Lent said Smidt’s point of view “sometimes brought a new awareness” that piqued public interest.

“Colleen was writing ‘Everything Bremerton’ before I was elected as mayor and I actually knew her husband and son better than I did Colleen,” Lent said. “At home, I am on her husband’s UPS route and see him often and when her son, Nick, attended Crown Hill Elementary, I judged his science

project, giving him a blue ribbon. I watched him grow and become quite proficient with robotics at West Hills Academy and I would see Colleen with him at each event.

“She did bring an eagle’s eye view of the city and the areas that were changing to our residents and to [newspaper] subscribers. ... This sudden passing will be a hardship for both Jason and Nick and I am so sorrowful for the family.”

Smidt lived in Bremerton but worked in Poulsbo and became acquainted with Poulsbo politics, too.

“I met Colleen over politics, specifically the opposition to the fast ferry,” Poulsbo Mayor Becky Erickson said. “Coming from Poulsbo, I didn’t know the south end rebels. Colleen stood out: smart, articulate, so concerned about her community with a pen that was like a sword. Wow, could she write! As we became friends I began to understand her depth of knowledge about all the community concerns, especially her deep commitment to quality education in Bremerton.

“She wanted the best schools, the best local government. I think her concern was based in the great love she had for her family. She wanted so much for Jason and Nick. She was protective like a momma bear. And her protective, almost fierce voice, was for her family and reached into the entire community.”

Bremerton Superintendent of Schools Aaron Leavell first met Smidt in 2005 at a school board meeting when he was principal at BHS.

”Colleen was highly respected by me, our staff and school board members,” Leavell said. “She was a straight shooter, always said what she thought and always did what she thought was the right thing to do. No sugar-coating her stance on issues or her messages. I sincerely appreciated that about her.”

Her passion “was grounded in the equity challenges we often face and her desire for Bremerton to be the best school district in the state. Having a child in our district allowed her to be in our schools, seeing both the great things that happen, and also areas where we could do better.

“Colleen was a confidant, an advocate, a friend to me and the district. [She] was thoughtful, articulate and intentional when it came to highlighting many aspects of our students, schools and district. Bremerton schools are better today because of Colleen Smidt.”

Smidt worked for Action Training Systems since 2003. “She was a feisty, ‘take charge’ kind of gal,” her employer, George Avila, said. “She was a car gal and I’m a car guy, so we could always talk cars. She was highly organized and loyal. And I liked her spunk. She always had a comeback one-liner.”

Friend Robert Parker met Smidt in an unusual way: in the men’s restroom at the Norm Dicks Government Center.

“We knew each other [online] but not closely and [we] both were attending a city council meeting that night,” Parker recalled.

Smidt entered the men’s restroom. “Robert, what are you doing in here?,” she asked him. Parker responded, “Well, Colleen, I might ask you the same thing.” She then realized she had entered the wrong restroom.

As it turned out, the layout of the hallway and the restrooms were reverse of those at her office, Parker said. “That little mistake has given us years of laughter and was the beginning of a great close friendship,” he said.

What amazed him most about Smidt was that she could become friends with anyone, despite their personal politics.

“Conservative, liberal or socialist, Colleen could respect an individual’s right to think as they do.”

Her friend Jane Rebelowski was one example of that.

“Colleen and I sparred on the Kitsap Sun’s [online] comment section for several years before meeting in person at a community forum regarding the 2008 presidential election,” Rebelowski said. “We were both in the process of leaving our respective political parties because we had both come to the conclusion that neither major party [cared] about the people, only the party. Colleen followed a more conservative point of view than I but we both grew to have a lot of common ground.

“Colleen’s life was cut way too short but she accomplished more for her family and community in the short time she was given than most who get 100 years on Earth.”

‘We were the spontaneous types’

Jason and Colleen Smidt met at community college in an English 101 class; both were living in Gig Harbor at the time.

They celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary in November. They were both only children and had just one son, Nick.

“We were the spontaneous types, so we decided one child would be good,” Jason said. “That way we could get up and go places and bring ‘the boy’ along.”

“The boy” is the affectionate nickname they have for their son.

They bought a home in Bremerton 20 years ago. “It’s an old 1915 Craftsman, just the style she liked,” he said. “She was so proud when we paid it off last year.”

Jason said Colleen’s commitment to the community came from her caring nature.

“She cared so much about people, especially children,” he said. “She was always doing things for the less fortunate, behind the scenes. She was a great team mom, too, and loved watching Nick play football and wrestle.” She was a Seattle Seahawks fan and an Iowa State University fan.

Her parents-in-law live in Iowa; her parents, Walt and Kathleen Cox, live in Sumner.

About three years ago, the Smidts bought a camping trailer, and in the past three years, they’d made it to 11 states and four Canadian provinces.

“It was something we had always wanted to do,” Jason said. “She loved camping.”

He said she also loved to read and to try new things.

“Anything adventurous,” he said.

— *Leslie Kelly is special sections editor for Kitsap News Group. Contact her at lkelly@soundpublishing.com.*



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