
Passionate wilderness activist Colleen McCrory dies

Colleen McCrory founded Valhalla Wilderness Society

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Prominent environmental activist Colleen McCrory, who gained international recognition with her campaigns to save wilderness from logging, died Sunday at 57 from brain cancer.

"We're all very much in shock," her son, Shea Pownall, said Monday, describing his mother's death as "very sudden."

McCrory died in New Denver, the West Kootenay town where she was born and raised and where she founded and ran the Valhalla Wilderness Society for more than three decades.

McCrory became ill two weeks ago and was diagnosed with brain cancer a week later. "It was a total surprise to all of us," said Anne Sherrod, a colleague and friend of McCrory's.

The Valhalla Wilderness Society was small but achieved great influence because of McCrory's passionate persona. The phrase "Brazil of the North" became a familiar one in B.C. because of the way she repeatedly used it to describe logging practices in the province.

During McCrory's last days, her family received condolences from other well-known B.C. environmentalists, including David Suzuki, Sierra Club activist Vicky Husband and Green party leaders Elizabeth May and Adrienne Carr.

"She had a lot of supporters not just in this country, but also around the world," said Pownall.

"She was the goddess of networking. She knew how to connect with people and rally support for wilderness areas all over the world."

McCrory won a governor-general's award in 1983 and in 1992 she won the prestigious \$60,000 U.S. Goldman Environmental Prize.

McCrory founded the Valhalla Wilderness Society in 1975 to protect the forests along Slocan Lake near New Denver, a small mining and lumber town in the West Kootenays in south-central B.C.

The environmental society sought to have part of the Valhalla mountain range of the Selkirk Mountains be declared a provincial park - and after an intensive eight-year lobbying effort by McCrory and other activists the 49,600-hectare Valhalla Provincial Park was established by the province along Slocan Lake.

"Valhalla is to me is a glimmering ray of hope," said McCrory to a reporter in 1987.

Her son, Pownall, said that the fight for Valhalla Park "became the blueprint for what it would take to protect other wilderness areas in B.C. and Canada."

McCrory went on to spearhead campaigns to protect other wilderness areas of B.C. She was active in the campaign to have South Moresby Island established as a national park reserve. She was coordinator of the B.C. Environmental Network from 1989 to 1990, working on issues ranging from forestry to mining in provincial parks. In 1991, McCrory founded Canada's Future Forest Alliance, a network of activists determined to save the country's forests.

McCrory was a natural leader, said her friend Sherrod. "Colleen was more than equal to the task. She was capable of standing up to the cameras and the radios and telling the world what was going on to the environment."

McCrory ran for the Green Party in the 2001 provincial election, finishing third in the riding of Nelson-Creston.

McCrory's activism angered many people in the forest-dependent communities of her Slocan Valley. She lost her clothing store in New Denver after it was boycotted. Someone threw a rock into her living room in 1986.

"She was extremely courageous," said Sherrod. "Colleen understood that as an environmentalist her role was not to be comfortable or to be liked. Her allegiance was to the environment and she would defend her principles no matter what the cost was to herself and she did pay a huge cost.

"In many ways she never really had a personal life, and by the time she finished her award-winning work saving the Valhalla and South Moresby, she was \$40,000 in debt. All her life she lived almost hand to mouth, right to the end."

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