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ALERT FEATURED TOP STORY

Johanna Calfee: Storyteller, creative, journalist, lover of people, lived in light, took flight

Rachael Smith

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In this November 2019 file photo, Johanna and Daryl Calfee pose for a portrait inside one of the lofts they created and located at 801 Church St.

The News & Advance file

Rachael Smith

"I do not feel strong or brave or anything close to a warrior. I feel like a mother trying to release a sense of control and protection into the hands of the Life Giver. It's time to trust what I can no longer control. What I never had control over in the first place." — Johanna Calfee

After a four-year battle with cancer, Johanna Calfee, 42, died Aug. 30.

The legacy she leaves behind is one of courage, of trying things, of facing fears and leaning into life, her husband of 20 years, Daryl Calfee said.

"I told the kids the other day, we are a living memorial to her right now in the way that we love each other and treat each other," he said.

Johanna was the mother of three children, Ella, Easton and Emmanuel. She wore many hats and excelled at everything she did.

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With a love of storytelling and journalism from a young age, Johanna was writing book and movie reviews for the Richmond Times-Dispatch as a teenager.

"She said when she was a little girl, she used to love to go through magazines, not for the pictures, but the way that the story was laid out," Daryl said.

She went on to major in broadcast journalism at Liberty University and was an adjunct professor there for two years. She also worked as an anchor, producer, reporter and weather forecaster. In 2007, Johanna and her news team won national

Emmy and Peabody awards. During her days being a one-woman-band reporter for WSLs, she even worked out of The News & Advance offices.

She also was the former owner and editor of five regional magazines, including Lynchburg Living.

The Calfees, who met in the communications school at Liberty University, have been working together since day one.

“She was my creative partner,” Daryl said. “I have come to realize that in the last couple of days, that’s what I miss so much already. She was my creative equal and we let each other lead in the area that we were most gifted in.”

Imagine that getting played out across an entire marriage.

“We never overlapped in our skill sets but yet were creative partners the whole time,” he said.

Johanna carried the room on her own without any help.

“If Jo was a part of the conversation or part of dinner or a part of the table, it was always an added bonus,” he said. “We joked about it, but I felt like I was good at setting up the relationships, but people really stayed in the relationship because of Jo because she had this ability to ask questions about you that looked deeply into who you were.”

Johanna wanted to figure out who people were or why they did what they did and created a beautiful story out of it to inspire people, Daryl said.

Beyond her professional career, he said she made everything into a joke.

“That's how we dealt with everything. Everything was laughter, everything was dark humor. Everything was sarcasm. She was so quick with it,” Daryl said. “And she was the first person to get the joke right.”

She and Daryl also won Dancing with the Lynchburg Stars in 2018.

"You did it scared. All of it. You don't have to work so hard, to worry so much about the rightness of each decision. Relax into the beauty of being here. You are still here. Keep going." — Johanna Calfee

Johanna saw things — future things — a vision for what they could be in both buildings and people.

The Calfees already were rebuilding and restoring forgotten homes and buildings through their company, Penny Lane Properties, for a decade when Johanna decided to get her Realtor's license and started working under Lauren Bell, owner of Lauren Bell Real Estate in 2019.

Johanna was working with clients just days before she died, Bell said.

"Johanna is an extremely hard worker," she said. "And so, she always continued to work because that was somewhat of an escape for her to keep her mind off things."

During various treatments, Bell said she would take over Johanna's listings but said Johanna always wanted to stay involved.

"Never once did I have to dive in and take over it all, which was incredible because she went through chemo and even radiation and underwent a single mastectomy while she was pregnant," she said. "But she'd be like, 'Hey, I might not feel well tomorrow and if I'm sleeping, I'm going to connect you with my buyer or seller.' She was always there for her clients and wanted them taken care of."

Bell said that's what made Johanna such a great Realtor, she genuinely cared not just for her clients but for all people.

Johanna wasn't one to make excuses or complain. The clients she was working with when she died, didn't even know she had cancer, Bell said.

"She was always good at fighting through it and putting on a good face," Bell said. "If anyone had the excuse, she had it, but she never used it."

If you knew her, you knew the real her, Bell said.

“She was just an incredible person. She was like a very good listener and very in tune with other people's feelings,” she said. “She was so patient and an incredible mom, wife and friend. I could always confide in her and trust her. She gave the best advice because she truly listened and cared.”

Johanna was beloved by all of her friends because she was the kind of person who made everyone feel like they were her best friend.

“She always wanted to help people become the best they could be,” Bell said.

"It is okay to be terrified, to scream out loud, to weep, to question, to seek, to wrestle, to find ... to journey." — Johanna Calfee

Joy Cover, president of Freedom 4/24, an organization that works to prevent and end sexual exploitation and trafficking locally and globally, met Johanna when they both were hired at the nonprofit in 2015.

At the time, Johanna was the director of marketing and communications and her passion for the non-trafficking organization was fierce, leading to trips to both India and Thailand.

“Her righteous anger and rage around that issue was pretty evident,” Cover said.

The two also formed a sisterhood as they were fighting this “monster that people were unaware of,” Cover said referring to traffickers.

After serving as interim director for the nonprofit for two months and then remaining on as a volunteer and board member, Johanna stepped down after she was diagnosed with cancer in 2019.

“Johanna has always been an advocate for the work that we do and has always had a heart for the girls who nobody cares about,” Cover said. “It's not recognized as a problem. And so even after rolling off the board, even with cancer and pregnancy and

having a baby, she was always a sounding board for me.”

One of Cover’s favorite memories with Johanna was on Cover’s birthday one year. Johanna brought Cover a hamster in a box to work for her friend’s birthday.

“I hate rodents,” Cover said. “I think it’s weird that people have them as pets and she and her kids always had weird pets like hamsters and chickens. She knew I hated them and borrowed one of Ella’s hamsters and she was bent over with laughter. It was ridiculous.”

Johanna found the thing she loved — advocating and fighting for those impacted by human trafficking — and she pursued it wholeheartedly, Cover said.

“As a result of her investment, women and girls around the world have been given a chance to have freedom, choice and a new life. She believed deeply in the work we do and made it her mission to be part of that work, even if the capacity within which she did that changed. If we can learn anything from Jo, it's to find the thing you can do to make the world better and do it.”

What she will miss most about her friend is how Johanna loved.

“Johanna loved people in the way they needed to be loved,” she said. “She had the unique ability to morph to people's wavelength, to make them feel truly seen, and to love them with their own special brand of love. She let people have the space to be their true selves without judgment and was able to connect in ways that were honoring people's individuality. She fully embraced you.”

Johanna taught compassion to her friends, family, community and anyone who crossed her path.

She became more compassionate through her own pain, Daryl said. She became more compassionate through every story that she told.

“The more experiences, the more stories, the more pain she experienced on her own, the more caring she can become for other people,” he said. “She knew them so deeply, because she truly was compassionate.”

Johanna posted a powerful message on her Instagram seven weeks ago: "What if this could actually be the happiest time of my life? The most relaxed and peaceful? Open-handed and feeling it all as it comes, bypassing nothing, even bringing pain and grief in for a long embrace. Because it's part of the human experience and to feel those things means I'm still alive. What a gift. Now to actually do it ..., "

"Life after. I think for the rest of my life I will think of it in two parts. BC, before cancer, and everything after. It has been a death and rebirth. Death is ugly and painful and scary. So is rebirth. But it's also beautiful and big and hopeful." — Johanna Calfee

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More Information

Johanna's family and friends will celebrate her remarkable memory at a private event. In lieu of flowers, the family kindly requests donations be made in her honor to Freedom 4/24.

Freedom 4/24

2306 Bedford Avenue

Lynchburg, VA 25403

Freedom424.org

Link: <https://freedom424.networkforgood.com/projects/195871-in-memory-of-johanna-calfee>

Johanna Calfee Quotes

- How quickly I forget that life is not about my plans.
- I admit it: I struggle with worry. I completely fear the unknown. The funny thing is that often I deal with fear by running towards it, not away from it.
- Living a life of comfort is not what living life as a Christ follower is about. That's not where hope lives.
- When people say that I'm stronger and braver and courageous I literally don't feel any of those things. I just have seen one giant at a time and just walk. So you can either choose to do it with your head falling off or you can choose to do it with the promise. And on the good days I've chosen the promise.
- His script for my life has been way better than I could have written.

By Rachael Smith

Reporter
