

Juli Nichols, 54, of Waltham; as Boston EMS paramedic, she healed and inspired



Juli Nichols helped raise public awareness of breast cancer. Juli Nichols helped raise public awareness of breast cancer.

As a Boston EMS paramedic, Juli Nichols saw everything happen to everyone. She could bring one patient to a hospital and minutes later the next call might send her to help a homeless alcoholic on Boston Common, a chief executive in an office tower, or someone somewhere in between.

What patients did not know, her colleagues said, was that amid the misfortune that left them in need of an ambulance, it became, in a way, their lucky day when Ms. Nichols arrived.

“She just had a way of relating to people,” said Paul Ahearn, a retired deputy superintendent of Boston Emergency Medical Services, who is now a pastoral care minister and interfaith chaplain at Boston Medical Center.

“She could have the sickest person in the world in her ambulance, and no matter what was happening, she would have this person laughing on her way into the hospital,” he said. “She just had a connection with people, once they were in the ambulance.”

Ms. Nichols, who turned her breast cancer diagnosis five years ago into an opportunity to teach colleagues about the illness and raise awareness and funds for cancer research, died Friday in her Waltham home. She was 54.

In October 2010, she was honored as the advanced life support provider of the year during the 10th annual Metro Boston EMS Council Region IV Awards.

“She just said last week that she was lucky she had a job she truly loved,” said her sister, Brenda Berry of Beverly.

Ms. Nichols began working for Boston EMS in 1983 and was an emergency medical technician before becoming a paramedic.

“During the majority of her time here, she has worked on two of the city’s busiest ALS ambulances,” Boston EMS said in a statement when she won the award. “There is no bigger advocate for her patients than Juli, who is known for providing exceptional care and strongly advocating for her patients.”

There also were few people her size so willing to step into the fray of saving lives on the streets of Boston.

“Pound for pound, she was one of the toughest individuals I’ve ever met in my life: 5-foot-2 and she would stand up to 6-foot anybody, and that’s the way she lived her life, and she was proud of that,” said her brother Bobby of Severna Park, Md.

“She excelled at her job,” said Dianne Cavaleri, a Boston EMS superintendent. “If you look up ‘hellion, spitfire, passionate, loyal, tenacious human being,’ there’s a picture of Juli.”

Family and colleagues say those descriptions could just as easily be applied to the hours Ms. Nichols spent away from work. Beginning with words that start with the letter S, she liked to swim, surf, sail, ski, snowshoe, and scuba dive. And that’s when she was not biking, hiking, kayaking, target shooting, or rock climbing. She hiked in Alaska, biked in Ireland, and played hockey in Russia.

“I will tell you that none of those were done halfheartedly,” her brother said. “She did everything to the fullest.”

Born in Brighton, Ms. Nichols was the third of four siblings. Her father drove a Greyhound bus, and her mother, died when Ms. Nichols was 11.

She spent much of her childhood and teen years in Woburn and in Florida, where she graduated from high school before returning to Massachusetts.

At first she drove an ambulance for the MSPCA at Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston. After studying to be a paramedic at Northeastern University, Ms. Nichols worked with a suburban ambulance service before joining Boston EMS.

“She was fearless, no doubt about it,” said Dan Hickey a Boston EMS paramedic who had worked with Ms. Nichols. “She wasn’t tall, but she was full of spunk. And she cared for the people that we treated.”

Petrina Sullivan, another Boston paramedic who worked with Ms. Nichols for a decade, said that “she just cared so passionately about what she did. And it really wasn’t even a job for her. It was part of her life. Everybody that she came in contact with, she just touched them. She was a gentle, kind, compassionate woman.”

Ms. Nichols worked with Survivors by the Sea, a group of cancer patients in Winthrop. She played bagpipes with the North Shore Pipe Band in Gloucester and was a member of the state Audubon Society.

Upon being diagnosed in spring 2008, she taught classes to colleagues to raise awareness about cancer in general and breast cancer in particular. Never averse to saying anything that might make anyone uncomfortable, she pointed out to colleagues that breast cancer could afflict men as well.

“She was taking what she was learning from this and wanted to help other people, too,” her sister said.

Ms. Nichols also dressed up as an elf for Christmas visits to hospitals and had been visiting children with AIDS since the early 1980s, when some health care professionals were wary of spending time with those diagnosed as HIV-positive.

“She made a great elf, an excellent elf,” Cavaleri said.

“And, oh, my God, she was funny,” said Sullivan, who once wanted to learn to surf. Ms. Nichols tried to show her how.

“She spent hours with me, and the best I could do was get up on the board and fall into the water,” Sullivan said. “At the end of the day, she looked at me and said, ‘I must say, you are the best underwater surfer I’ve ever met.’ That was Juli. She could always make something good out of something bad.”

In addition to her brother Bobby and sister, Brenda, Ms. Nichols leaves another brother, Stephen of Henryville, Pa.

Family and friends will gather to celebrate Ms. Nichols’s life at 11 a.m. Thursday in Lucy Stone Chapel at Forest Hills Cemetery in Jamaica Plain.

As Ms. Nichols was being treated, even when her health declined, “her thinking was, ‘This is happening to me to help someone else,’ ” Sullivan said. “She’d say, ‘Even if they don’t find a cure for me, they’ll find a cure for somebody else.’ ”

Sullivan added that “there was nothing negative about her,” which included Ms. Nichols’s plans for her memorial service and gathering afterward.

“She said, ‘Do not mourn for me; I want you guys to have a party and have a margarita,’ ” Sullivan said. “So we’re showing up in colorful clothes, because she said no black.”