

Highlander people

Singer always reached for the high notes

By Lisa Harrison

When it comes to living life fully, Zoe Chilco is among those who did it best.

The vibrant jazz and blues singer died on Oct. 6 at the age of 75. Chilco had been diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer in March 2019 and treatments were unsuccessful.

Chilco left such a deep impression on others that, when asked for an interview about Chilco's life, one local friend called a meeting with four others to ensure the singer was honoured fully.

Cheryl and Dave Bathe, Carolyn Coburn, Eric Lilius and Heather Ross collaborated to provide a clear image of a warm, witty, energetic, engaging and compassionate woman who always aimed high in life.

Many Highlands residents may know Chilco best for her local concerts and the consecutive music

shows she hosted on CanoeFM over the course of 15 years: The Blue Canoe and Zoe's Haphazard Saturday Nights.

But Chilco's life began in Toronto and music was not her first career. She taught high school French in Toronto and trained as a registered massage therapist. Chilco came to Haliburton in the late 1980s and worked as a massage therapist at Magic Touch, then owned by Cheryl Bathe.

Bathe's children were young when Chilco first paid a visit.

"Immediately after Zoe arrived, she got down on the floor to play with the children," recalled Bathe. "After she left, they appeared confused. They asked me, 'Is she a kid or is she an adult?'"

The friends described Chilco as fearless, determined, and a principled feminist and social justice advocate. She was a charter member of the HERS (Haliburton Emergency Rural Shelter) Committee

and held a concert for the cause. HERS eventually brought a women's shelter to the County.

The singer had "great style," loved food and travel, and knew eight languages. She was constantly writing songs, arranging gigs, and lining up musicians to accompany her. She performed in numerous locations in the Toronto area and cottage country and sang for six years with Highlands local, Gord Kidd.

Chilco recorded 10 CDs, one of them at a local studio with local musicians. Her song "Havelock Street" reached the finals of a British songwriting contest.

"Zoe was an inspiration," said Coburn. "After she learned that she had cancer, she just carried on ... She had such a positive attitude."

Chilco continued performing. She posted all her lyrics on her blog. She planned a trip to Ireland for a music festival and another to Italy with her son Chris and his family. When the pandemic lockdown kept her home and

feeling cooped up, Chilco wrote the song "It's Annoying" and posted it on Facebook. She held three porch concerts for her neighbours. She published a novella, *Wind Dancing*, and arranged for it be turned into a podcast, and she published some of her writings on wattpad.com.

Chilco's blogs reveal a woman determined to make the best of life. In May 2019, she was able to attend a fundraising concert she had arranged in Toronto, and the next day wrote:

"Today, the hospital having drawn my blood once more, I too draw again, but on that night's memory. Make a joyful noise, indeed. They all did, performers and audience, and my heart, which is still reeling from the experience, it's noisily joyful. As the song says: "They Can't Take That Away From Me." It will triumph over many a depressing scenario, just because it happened, and I was there."



Zoe Chilco's CD "Feme Sole". Photo submitted



Zoe Chilco. Photo submitted

In July 2020: "Cancer sucks big time, but there are always lots of good things and people in my life as I 'wind down' ... and recently, a song written for me. It's a beautiful tune, with memories of my beloved Twelve Mile Lake ... and a nod to my old band Funky Knees."

Lilius concluded for the five friends: "Zoe said 'I'm gonna live 'til I die' and she really did."

Chilco arranged a medically-assisted death at home with family and music and asked friends to play "Into the Mystic" by Van Morrison. She leaves behind her son Chris, his wife Morgan and their children Jack and Phoebe, her six siblings and many friends. Chilco's final resting place is Twelve Mile Lake United Church Cemetery. A memorial may be held when it is safe to gather.