

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

Dana, we'll miss you

The premature death of Knox County Board member Dana Shallenberger is, of course, a tragedy to her family and friends. The last few years have been a nightmare for her, clearly becoming ill, then finding out she had lung cancer. In the midst of her illness, she lost her 22-year-old son to suicide — something from which a parent never recovers, especially when illness and depression are already in force.

My husband and I first met Dana during a political campaign in 1992. My daughter, Eva, reminded me of the good times she and Dana had around that time when she started in the radio news reporting business and Dana was part of her beat at the courthouse.

In her healthy days, Dana was a lively, fun, sharp cookie who always had a smile on her face. During one of her first county board meetings in early 2002, she raised hell about something, I don't remember what, but she made an immediate impact on the board and the news media. She was articulate and unafraid of expressing her opinions.

For years Dana managed the Traffic Division of the Circuit Clerk's office, one of the busiest and most stressful operations in the courthouse. While working across the hall in the County Clerk's for several years in the late 1990s, I was impressed with her ability to manage that office. When Mary Stein announced she was going to retire from the position of Circuit Clerk, Dana decided to run for the office. She and her husband, Doug, ran a terrific campaign. Dana was always thrilled at the number of her supporters who came to her fundraisers and contributed to her campaign. Because I was chairman of the Knox County Democrats at the time, my husband and I were involved and the Shallenbergers became our friends. During the campaign I found out that a friend of mine for 25 years, Dan Mooney, is her father. He and I worked at Galesburg Electric together in 1975 and had entirely too much fun.

Dana lost her race by only about 400 votes. But politics is a tough business. Dana's opponent was another employee of the Circuit Clerk's office, Kelly Cheesman, and she was a well-known and strong candidate. Those of us who have been in the trenches of elections and political party work know how well Dana did in that election. But Dana

was bitter and upset. She quickly quit her job at the courthouse, which her friends and probably family members didn't want her to do.

She proceeded to further her education at Carl Sandburg College and acquired her degree in Mortuary Science, doing part time work at Watson Funeral Home. By the time she finished her courses and passed her state boards, she was really too sick to get a full time job. She wanted to work. Her husband was finally eligible for retirement and a week before she died, he retired from his job with Caterpillar to take care of her.

And I have something to say to the manager of the Main Street Hy-Vee who called the Galesburg police and had Dana arrested for shoplifting. You stink. Dana told me she had just left the hospital after having part of her lung removed and was getting prescriptions filled. While waiting for them, she did some shopping. She suddenly felt sick and pushed her cart, with hardly anything in it, outside with her so she could sit down and get some fresh air. While she was sitting there, the police arrived and put her in handcuffs. She offered to pay for the goods and it fell on deaf ears. She lived across the street from the store and had traded there since its inception.

Then, of course, her arrest was put in our daily newspaper with a sensational headline because she was a county board member. Dana was banned from going into the store or buying gas next door.

I consider this lack of compassion a disgrace for this small town. Why would the manager not be concerned about her health, and instead call the police? Don't the Galesburg police have anything better to do than arrest a sick woman who weighed all of 100 pounds? I've been infuriated at the management of Main Street Hy-Vee, the Galesburg police and the Register-Mail for their not bothering to ask anyone who knows Dana what was going on in her life at that time.

All I can say is that Dana, in her last few years, gave new meaning to the words "spirit" and "courage."

Dana, on behalf of all your friends, we are grateful to have had, and always will have, you in our lives. Peace be with you, my friend.