

Kyle Roos – PharmD 2008 Pharmacy

St.Paul, MN – Age 43

10/9/1977 – 12/23/2020

Just days after her son was put on a ventilator at a Twin Cities hospital while battling COVID-19, Valerie Laidlaw tapped out a letter to him on her cellphone.

Her 43-year-old firstborn, Kyle Roos of Little Canada, was fighting for his life. More than 200 miles away at her home in Moorhead, Laidlaw felt geographically disconnected but also frustrated because she couldn't visit her son in the midst of the pandemic.

So that's how it started: "Dear Kyle," she wrote.

Laidlaw recalled in that inaugural letter that she posted on her blog the determined wail her son let out when he was born, his bountiful swirl of curls, his determination to scale countertops and the family's Christmas tree, and his command of the alphabet, songs and books at a young age.

"You were a strong, determined little guy," she wrote.

All told, over the next month, Laidlaw penned 28 letters to her son — a single dispatch a day. Often, she'd sign off: "You've got this Kyle! Love, Mom."

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended all rituals around illness, death and dying, including those involving how we communicate with one another during difficult times, said Frank Bennett, senior teaching fellow at the Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing at the University of Minnesota.

"Everyone is basically on their own ice floe," he said. "You can sort of wave to each other, but you can't have that [physical] connection. Having a ritual to re-establish that connection is really important, even if it's not physical."

Some take to social media or websites such as CaringBridge to connect with family and friends, but writing letters soon became Laidlaw's ritual.

"Maybe part of it was therapeutic," she said recently. "But I mostly wanted others to know him." She posted the letters on her personal blog and then published them on Twitter.

Roos, a pharmacist who graduated from North Dakota State University, was the father of two girls, ages 15 and 10, and husband of Jaclyn Roos, his partner of 20 years.

By all accounts, he had a wide circle of friends, colleagues and family attracted to his big heart and generous nature.

"He was super kind," Jaclyn Roos said. "He always cared about what was going on with everyone else, he always listened and never judged."

Roos suffered from chronic asthma most of his life, and on Nov. 12 he tested positive for COVID-19, which has claimed the lives of more than 5,800 Minnesotans.

Once he was hospitalized, Laidlaw began writing her son letters, hoping that perhaps he could read them when he recovered.

Unfailingly upbeat, Laidlaw relayed news of his care, first at Regions Hospital in St. Paul, then at the University of Minnesota Medical Center.

She revisited memories — the trip out west in her Subaru when Roos was 10 years old. The pleather hide-a-bed couch from his younger days, more duct tape than anything else. And his first concert — Rick Nelson at the Civic Center in Fargo.

There were updates on Roos' family and details of the day — the baby back ribs in the smoker, the pink Christmas cactus a family member sent and that beautiful crescent moon a few weeks back.

"My mind is constantly preoccupied with thinking, hoping, and wishing for you," Laidlaw wrote. "I look at photos of you from very young to not so long ago. So many good family times, so many celebrations, and reasons to celebrate! So much love!"

Laidlaw, who has written poetry since she was a child, included her own poems in the letters, as well.

About a month after his diagnosis, Jaclyn Roos launched a personal journal documenting her husband's COVID-19 struggle on CaringBridge, which has become a popular platform for keeping loved ones informed about health crises. The Eagan-based nonprofit has seen some 850,000 sites created since its founding in 1997. Kyle's page has attracted more than 13,000 visits.

CaringBridge CEO Liwanag Ojala says there has been an increase in the number of sites created since the pandemic struck last spring.

Doing so helps make "sense of the chaos that is the role of the caregiver," Ojala said. "You don't want to use time saying the same story over and over. It's a practical way to get the word out during the health journey."

At the same time, "there's a catharsis for caregivers when you tell your story and it's heard by your community," she added. "These are moments in the darkness when you get to reflect. The ability to write down your story and share it with others is so important."

The journals are also lasting records that can be tucked away and visited later.

"I started it because so many people were reaching out wanting to know what was going on," Roos said. "I was so overwhelmed."

Roos' entries on CaringBridge updated visitors on her husband's medical care, as well as relayed family news and words of encouragement and love for her husband, who was unable to speak while tethered to a heart-lung machine. The entries illustrated in stark terms how patients with COVID-19 can thrive one day, only to decline, sometimes tragically, the next.

Which was the case with Kyle Roos. On Dec. 23, his wife posted: "Well I received the call we were all hoping would never come around 11 a.m." There was nothing more to be done to save him, she wrote. "Absolutely heartbroken."

Laidlaw penned her final letter to her son the same day.

"You put up a strong battle, Kyle. I am so proud of you!

"Love, Mom."