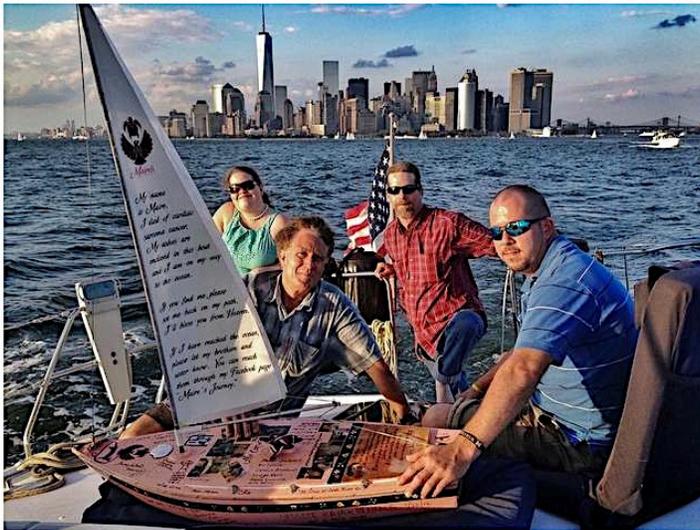


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Maire's journey

A life cut short by cancer, an endless voyage, and a message to others

NEAL RUBIN 1 COMMENTS



Filmmaker Keith Famie, front left; Maire Kent's sister Nora Hall; and brothers Brendan and Geoff sail toward Maire's release in New York Harbor. (andy Steadwell)

Maire Kent floated off into the Atlantic Ocean on Saturday, bound for parts and adventures unknown.

That was 14 days after she set sail on Lake Michigan.

It was 10 months after she died.

Maire had cardiac sarcoma, a primary tumor of the heart. Rare and vicious and fatal. She also had a way of affecting people.

Her friends will tell you she still does — and one of them promises that Maire is

only getting started.

That friend is Keith Famie, who we first knew as a chef, then as a reality show contestant. Now, at 54, he's a filmmaker whose documentaries have won 10 local Emmys.

He's the one who first suggested to Maire, pronounced "Mary," that her ashes sail away in their own little boat.

He's also the one who regretted it as soon as she said, "That would be really cool."

What boat? How? For that matter, why?

The last question was the only one with an easy answer. Because she wanted it, because she deserved it, because so many others might learn from it or take joy from it.

"My name is Maire," said the note on the sail of the 3-foot-long vessel that Famie's cameras tracked from a beach in Emmet County to New York Harbor.

It explained how she died, and that she was on her way to the ocean. "If you find me," it requested, "please set me back on my path. I will bless you from Heaven."

Spreading her story

Maire Kent grew up in southwest Detroit. She was near the middle in a pack of 10 kids in a family that ultimately moved to Gaines, a village of 380 people about 15 miles southwest of Flint.

She marched off to join the Army when she was 18. Later, she was an aide at a nursing home in Commerce Township. Later still, swollen with edema, she was a patient there, dependent on a wheelchair.

She died at 24. Then the rest of her story began.

The story includes a blind carpenter named George Wurtzel, who went to school with Stevie Wonder. He built the boat, which also carried the names and photos of a dozen other sarcoma victims.

It includes a former producer and director on “Survivor” named John Feist, who shares those roles with Famie on a movie they’re calling “Maire’s Journey.”



It includes a flotilla of kind people who encountered the boat, equipped with GPS, as the film crew tracked its journey. “What should I do with it?” the strangers would ask.

“That’s up to you,” Famie would say.

Student sailors from the Grosse Pointe Yacht Club

towed it ashore. Patriot Guard Riders carried it in a sidecar from Belle Isle to the River Raisin. A lumberjack fished it out of the Straits of Mackinac. Two elderly gents along the Erie Canal route whisked it by train to Penn Station in New York.

At the yacht club, the commodore blanched; his ex-wife had the same disease and doctor as Maire, and died a week before she did. As the boat ran aground on a bank of the Erie Canal, a woman read the name of one of the sarcoma casualties and screamed: It was the same as her father’s.

“The story,” Famie says, “became everybody’s story.”

A chance meeting

He and Maire met because he'd gone to see her cardiologist for a chest pain that disappeared the morning after he and Maire first spoke.

They bonded immediately, he says. Sometimes he would take her to chemotherapy. Once he and the doctor broke her out of the hospital for a Kenny Chesney concert.

Ultimately, inevitably, she made her final escape.

A sister and two of her brothers were aboard a motor boat Saturday when it came time to say goodbye. Behind them was Manhattan. Above them stood the Statue of Liberty.



The little boat and the pictures of the other casualties would come home to Famie's office. The ashes, her family shook gently into the water.

He's hoping to have her movie finished by spring. He's not sure where it will go; film festivals, probably, and in a perfect world, someplace like HBO.

Every premiere will raise money for research, he says. That he knows.

What he hopes is that the people who see "Maire's Journey" will be as touched as he was by a buoyant young woman and the strangers who helped her sail away.