

# In memoriam: Jim Williams – A writer, photographer and a brave man

By Jim Cornelius  
Editor in Chief

*“All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.”*

— Ernest Hemingway

*Nugget* columnist Jim Williams lost his long battle with cancer on March 10, dying in hospice here in Central Oregon, with his extended family by his side.

It was a battle he documented in his column “Cancer and me,” an unflinching and sometimes harrowing window on what it is like to face a cancer diagnosis for the third time in his life. Jim didn’t flinch. It’s hard enough to face the truth when you know that cancer is going to kill you; harder still to find the words to describe exactly what that means — to you and to those you love. But Jim wanted to do that. He wanted to write one true sentence. And then another.

He called me on the day he went into hospice care. He had two requests: “I want to write one more column,” he said. He was a little worried that the drugs he was being given to manage agonizing pain might make it impossible, but he wanted to try. And one more thing: “Will you write something about me?” he asked.

Jim didn’t get the chance to write that last column — the pain was too great, the insidious disease had dug its claws in too deep. He wasn’t conscious and lucid long enough to put together any more true sentences. So, in fulfillment of his other request, I will try:

Jim Williams was a writer. When you’re a real writer, it’s not just something you do, it’s what you are. You have a need to gain understanding through banging out one word after another, hoping that you can explain, convince or simply describe — to make sense of the world to yourself and to others. If the one last damn thing you are determined to achieve in a life you know is running out is to write one

more column, my friend, you are a writer.

“Cancer and me” helped people. I know that, because I heard from readers, and so did Jim. His writing made them feel less alone in a world grown dark in the shadow of cancer. There is nothing that means more to a writer.

“It was huge,” Jim’s wife, Katie, said. “It was authentic and healing and a way for him to get his own emotions out about what was going on. Sometimes it’s easier to write what you’re going through than it is to talk about it, to verbalize it.”

Katie thinks that Jim’s column was also a way for him to explain to his daughter Angela what he was going through without having to tell her face-to-face.

Jim made his living as a plan reviewer for several agencies and municipalities. When he was living in Sisters, he worked for the building department of Deschutes County, part of the time with a particular responsibility for Sisters, where he’d sunk his roots in 1998. The Great Recession that hammered the housing market in Central Oregon and across the United States starting in 2007 and 2008 forced the county to lay him off. It was then that he picked up a camera, and shortly after that, a pen.

“It wasn’t until middle age that he really embraced the creative in himself,” Katie reflected.

He combined his passion for cycling with his newfound interest in photography in his first freelance assignment for *The Nugget*, shooting the Sisters Stampede Mountain Bike Race.

“He loved it,” Katie recalled.

He had taken up cycling after beating cancer for the second time, in 2004. He was determined not to let his health struggles keep him from an active life.

“He never dwelled on that,” Katie said. “After his treatment for his second cancer, he wasn’t going to let it stop his life.”

Katie became part of that life after they met online. When they met in person in Portland, Katie recalled, “He was such a cool customer.” Katie had determined that a good sense of humor was right at the top of the list for qualified dating material, and Jim had that, for sure.

“He made me laugh so much that day,” she said.

And, she says, their first kiss was a toe-curler.

“Good kisser. Makes me laugh. Those are pretty good things,” she said.

They got married and Katie joined Jim at home in Sisters in 2006.

The road got very rough and dark, but Katie is profoundly grateful for the depth that their relationship developed through adversity. She noted that Jim had “kind of a rough childhood” without much in the way of emotional support. In their marriage, in sickness and in health, he found that.

“He really got to experience unconditional love,” she said. “That’s the thing that I’m most grateful for — that he was able to experience that before he died.”

It wasn’t always easy to accept, particularly in the indignities of a terrible form of cancer.

“Jim was such a proud person and it was so hard for him that I had to help him,” Katie said.

In one of his last columns, Jim reflected: “Looking back, I just shake my head in amazement. I was always kinda surprised that anybody would fall in love with ME. That someone would go through this torture with me and not leave was even more amazing. For better or worse? Katie got a heapin’ helpin’ of worse to last a lifetime. Despite this illness, I’m a very lucky man. There is nothing like the love of a good woman. Especially one who will put up with everything that someone with cancer goes through.”

Last month, Jim decided that he wanted to write about other things. He didn’t know

how long he had, but he was tired of looking inward and wanted to engage with the world again. Unsurprisingly, his first “new” column, which we titled “Through these eyes,” was about music — perhaps the most powerful element in his emotional life outside his love for his wife and daughter.

“Music was so important to him,” Katie recalled. It wasn’t just music — it was the lyrics; how a song made you feel, how it expressed what you were going through in your life.”

In talking with Katie about the complex, intelligent, passionate man who was her husband, we both kept coming back to how extraordinarily brave he was — even though he did not see himself that way.

“I would tell him time after time that he was the bravest person I’ve ever met,” she said.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Jim Williams lost his battle with cancer on March 10.

He showed that on these pages. It takes tremendous fortitude to look a painful death in the face and sit down and write it out, one true sentence at a time.

A Celebration of Jim Williams’ life will be held on Saturday, April 14, from 2 to 5 p.m. in the Brooks Room at Black Butte Ranch.

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