

LEGACY from page 8A

“Her vision of it was just incredible,” said Annie, who played the opera star Maria Callas in the production. “It was a very technical show, and, oh boy, was that grueling. Leah was always great, though, never pressuring me. She was always doing everything to help me out.”

The small cast included Sheena Moore, who had previously worked with Leah on “Les Mis.”

“The times I was able to work with her, it was like the stars aligned so I could work with her,” Sheena said. “She was easy to work with, and her directing style was conducive to her personality. She was very much an actor’s director. She would say, ‘Just do what feels right to you.’ She was very open and easygoing.”

Leah continued that openness in her personal life. A founder of PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) in Florence, she attended Florence United Methodist Church partly due to its nature as a reconciling congregation, or a church open to inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

“The whole idea of acceptance and taking people where they are, and allowing the spiritual side of people who may be hiding to come out and be open, was important to her,” said Kathleen, who worked with Leah to provide sound and video services for the church.

Kathleen actually met Leah at the church. She hadn’t planned on attending, but the congregation kept pulling her back.

Besides running sound, Leah also served on the Nurture Committee, which takes care of members within the church.

“She was very, very grounded in her spiritual life,” Kathleen noted.

“She was a quiet force of nature,” Annie added. “And, for me to say as a practicing atheist, she was a Christian who lived everything she believed. I have never in my life known a more generous person.”

“Generous” is a term that often came up with Leah, though she again preferred her actions be kept behind the scenes. Last December, she commissioned local artist Kassy Keppol to create a Christmas mural that could be displayed in her parents’ yard. Kassy said she planned to use the payment to buy holiday

gifts for a family in need, so Leah increased the amount she paid.

“She was a lover and a giver. She gave and gave. And she never stopped,” Kathleen said. “She was like the Energizer Bunny. Her email was spitfire — spitfire Leah. That was perfect for her. And she cared so much for so many people. If she loved you, she loved you full out.”

Leah often helped people in tangible ways, including yard work and household tasks.

“Besides working together in theater, which we did for a lot of plays, she was at my house all the time doing stuff,” Annie said. “She was up on my roof cleaning the gutters out, working in the gardens and doing repairs that needed to be done. Anywhere I look in my house there’s Leah.”

Sometimes, during a long weekend of shows, such as the FEC’s Winter Music Festival, Leah might slip away for an hour or two to help someone with their lawn. Anyone who needed help, and she would be there, either herself or someone stepping in because she asked. She also helped keep the grounds at the Methodist Church.

“If someone needed something fixing, she was there,” Kathleen said.

Even with the infrequent setbacks from her illnesses, Leah always bounced back, often with more ideas and grander schemes.

Local vocal coach and performer Jason Wood was often roped into helping.

“She always wanted to do projects and she wanted us to be involved,” he said.

Sometimes he was able to step in, such as in LRP’s “Sound of Music” in 2013, when he took the role of Captain von Trapp, but sometimes it didn’t work out. It didn’t matter. Leah would ask again about another project.

Once, however, Leah was the one pursued for a role on stage.

“This story is never going to be



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN WENZEL

Last Resort Players’ 2014 production of “Les Misérables”

as good as she told it,” Sheena observed.

In 2014, Last Resort Players was casting “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee.”

“The role of vice principal is someone who sees under the surface, and it needs a dry, sarcastic sense of humor. I thought about it ... and thought, ‘Oh! Leah will be perfect,’” Sheena said. “I tell her, ‘I’m looking for someone who plays the vice principal, and I need someone who is really dry and blunt, and is really sarcastic. Would you be interested?’ And she thought it was hilarious.”

Leah reacted with the humor that made her perfect for the role of Vice Principal Donna Panch, a loveorn has been recently returned to help moderate the school’s spelling bee.

“I’ll never forget her delivery of the ‘I’m lactose intolerant’ line, and it was just the perfect delivery,” Sheena said.

Leah never again took the stage, but she continued to work with shows. “Grey Gardens,” coming this Nov. 2 to 4 at the FEC, was the final play she worked on.

“That is a show she has wanted to do for years,” Annie said. “It was a hard sell, because most people have never heard of it. But you read it, and oh my goodness, it’s funny — but darkly comic. There are these wonderful scenes, and she knew exactly what she was going to do.”

According to Kathleen, part of the reason it took so long for “Grey Gardens” to come into fruition was that Leah was still working out the show in her mind.

“From what she said, she was trying her feet with ‘Master Class’ first. ‘Master Class’ was also obscure, and

we sold out, and I think that really gave her that boost of, ‘If we can sell out that one, we can sell out ‘Gray Gardens.’” — or, at least, have great sales,” Kathleen said.

Although Last Resort Players and Florence’s theater groups had proved several times what Florence was capable of with its shows, people had doubts — “but Leah convinced them,” Annie said.

“Leah liked hearing stuff that people didn’t think she could do, or that could be done in Florence, and then doing it,” Sheena said. “She always liked meaty projects, or projects that weren’t all just yuks and laughs. They were big undertakings — and ‘Grey Gardens’ is a big undertaking. There’s a lot of subtext and dark, sad things.”

The play is about Edith Bouvier Beale and her grown daughter, Edie, and the history of their estate, the Grey Gardens. It can be played as big as Broadway, but the Last Resort Players are bringing it down into a refined, concert-style performance.

The show was already cast and in rehearsals when news of Leah’s death came to Florence.

“With the blessing of the family, we are going on with this play as a tribute,” Annie said. “It’s hard to think of what you want to do when you’re grieving like that, but we decided to go forward with the show and talked about what we should do. ... Finding a new director was the big issue, and Jason saved our bacon.”

Jason had previously declined a role in the show, as summer is an important performance time for his drag queen alter ego, Fanny Ruggburn. But, for Leah, he was willing to put things on hold and become

the play’s director.

“I did it because it was the right thing to do,” he said. “Have you ever been proposed something, and you can’t say no? You can’t say no to it. You have to do it,” he said.

Sheena said, “And he already had an affinity for the show and a love for the

do this.”

In a way, the cast and the local community have taken up the mantle of honoring Leah by continuing the show.

“She took us all as we were, even people with very different viewpoints than her,” Sheena said. “Even people with viewpoints that were detrimental to her, she was still loving and accepting.”

Leah provided a bridge for the theater world, connecting equipment and services to anyone who needed an extra hand.

“Everybody says, ‘She was my best friend,’” Kathleen said. “I know I’m not the only one who says that. And what an impact! Not everyone can say that, that everyone you meet thinks that they’re more important than everybody else they’ve ever met. Wow. Leah was so kind. And she didn’t just give words to it, she gave actions to her kindness.”

A celebration of Leah’s life will be held this Saturday, Sept. 9, at 1:30 p.m., at the FEC, 715 Quince St. In lieu of flowers, people are encouraged to make a donation to Friends of the Florence Events Center or the Multiple Sclerosis Society.

In addition, the Friends of the FEC have a memorial brick planned to honor Leah, and community members are working with Western Lane Community Foundation to establish a scholarship fund in her name. More details will be available during the celebration of life.

For more information about the Last Resort Players’ production of “Grey Gardens,” visit www.lastresortplayers.com.

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SIUSLAW WATER SHED COUNCIL – CELEBRATE SALMON FUNDRAISER Saturday, SEPT 22 5:30 p.m.

FLORENCE FESTIVAL OF BOOKS KEYNOTE SPEAKER: AMY STEWART Friday, SEPT 28 7:00 p.m.

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