

COMMUNITY NEWS

Local author talks family, mental health in second book

BY JUDITH VAN BERKOM

Westboro author Donna McCart Sharkey had her second book—*Falling Together: A family's story of mental illness and grief*—published in March of this year by Demeter Press.

The book documents Donna's personal experiences with the mental illness of her daughter, Alessandra, and how, as she describes it, mental illness lives within a family, moves in, and can create a train wreck amidst the good things. It also deals with what grief does to a family.

Falling Together, as Donna describes, was written for several reasons: to see clearly

and make sense of the chaos and to speak to the silence—her own silence, the silence of others and the silence of society's systems and institutions.

There's not a lot written about mental illness and the impact it has on families, so Donna says she wrote out of a sense of responsibility. The book was written in small increments, with Donna taking breaks in between, as the experience was painful and brought back many memories. The book describes a particular type of parenthood, both before and after Alessandra's death.

Who was Alessandra? Donna describes her daughter as an optimist whose strength lay in her desire to be happy. She was fun-loving and

full of energy and she was so much more than her mental illness. That was another reason for writing this book, Donna said: children who have mental illness are more than just children with mental illness. Children who have died are more than just children who have died.

Alessandra was a daughter, a sister, a friend, niece, cousin, aunt. She loved sports and was good at them—basketball in particular—and good at fixing things. She was a giver of gifts, a generous woman. She loved animals and worked at the Wild Bird Centre and the Experimental Farm. She loved the holiday seasons. She had a really big smile. But when she wasn't feeling good, she

would be very depressed.

Alessandra died in November 2013 in a mental health hospital. She suffered from mental illness for most of her young life and passed away at age 36.

People have asked Donna if writing this book helped her deal with the loss. Writing can be a way of healing but, in this case, for her it became more of a realization.

"I had pushed a lot to my mind's periphery. But, as I was writing, at one point I thought of what Jungians say: one becomes enlightened by making the darkness conscious, making what was on the periphery of the mind conscious. It opened part of the mind I had previously closed off—the benefit of excavating your life."

Falling Together: A family's story of mental illness and grief is available through the Ottawa Public Library, where they have five copies. The book is also available for purchase through Demeter Press at demeterpress.org