

Medical miracle' won't let ALS defeat her – She will lead an 'Afternoon of Forgiveness' Saturday

Chestnut Hill Local – September 20, 2013



FORGIVENESS WORKSHOP: *The Mariah Fenton Gladis Foundation invites the public to join them for a free workshop, “An Afternoon of Forgiveness,” at Germantown Mennonite Church, 21 West Washington Lane, on Saturday, Sept. 21, 2 to 5 p.m. Join renowned psychotherapist, Mariah Fenton Gladis, in this non-denominational, inspirational and experiential afternoon workshop that focuses on the beneficial mind, body and spiritual effects of forgiveness, a life-changing act that can be an antidote to depression, anxiety and shame. Mariah, a 32-year survivor of Lou Gehrig’s Disease (ALS), will share her secrets of using the act of forgiveness as a powerful and transformative tool to miraculously move beyond her disability and create a fulfilling life.*

by Carole Verona

“My doctors call me a medical miracle,” said psychotherapist Mariah Fenton Gladis.

Mariah, 65, is a 33-year survivor of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), often referred to as Lou Gehrig’s Disease. ALS is a progressive

neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. As the disease progresses, the ability of the brain to initiate and control muscle movement is lost. Patients in the later stages of the disease may become totally paralyzed. According to the ALS Association's website, there is no cure or treatment today that halts or reverses ALS.

When Mariah was diagnosed with ALS in 1981, her doctor told her that she had a 10 percent chance of surviving more than six months to two years, which is the normal life expectancy of a person diagnosed with ALS. She describes her reaction to the news on the Pennsylvania Gestalt Center's website: "This was a terrible shock to me — me, the athlete who jogged every day, who watched my diet and took my vitamins. My husband Ron and I were not yet married. In fact, we had just gotten engaged. In the wake of the diagnosis, I told him that he didn't have to go through with it.

"I wasn't the woman he thought he was marrying, and quite frankly, I didn't know what was going to happen. Instead of heading for the hills, which he could have done quite justifiably, he planted himself in front of me, affirmed his love and assured me that he wasn't one to walk away from a commitment." They got married soon after and, she says, "Here I am ... still battling and winning so far."

Ron was by her side during a recent telephone interview. He explained that the disease has affected Mariah's ability to speak clearly, so he would be there to translate for her.

Mariah, who has now been living with ALS for as long as she lived without it, said, "I try to live with ALS in the background. I'm feeling well. Fortunately I never felt sick. That's the positive part about ALS. It's not a painful disease. It's frustrating; it's an inefficient way to live." She stays healthy by adhering to a strict diet, taking a daily regimen of vitamins and supplements, going to the gym five times a week and seeing a chiropractor and a deep muscle massage therapist once a week.

Mariah, a resident of Malvern, founded the Pennsylvania Gestalt Center for Psychotherapy and Training in 1973. She defines Gestalt therapy as "a lively and holistic experiential approach to healing and personal growth that emphasizes the development of awareness — emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual — and the capacity to

make healthy contact with one's self, others and the environment.”

In her counseling practice, she tries to get right to the heart of the matter. “I will create experiences for people that will precisely respond to what they need. I help them develop an active, loving, compassionate relationship with themselves that becomes the foundation of a fulfilled life,” she said.

Mariah is also known for using music in therapy. “When I work with someone, I listen very carefully for a theme and a need, and then I select a song that responds to what they're trying to say or what they're hoping to become. I have an extensive inventory of thousands of songs, so I custom select for each individual.” Lately, she has been starting her workshops by playing “My City of Ruins” by Bruce Springsteen. “It's a song about your life and coming back,” she added.

Mariah refuses to let ALS slow her down. She continues to conduct workshops throughout the U.S., Europe, the West Indies and South America. She once brought 30 people to Machu Picchu, Peru, for a 12-day series of workshops. Her doctor advised against it because of the altitude, but Ron said that telling Mariah not to do something is the same as telling her to do it! She also sees a full roster of clients every week, teaches at the center, leads five groups every other week and wrote a book, “Tales of a Wounded Healer.”

On Saturday, Sept. 21, from 2 to 5 p.m., she will lead a free non-denominational workshop, “An Afternoon of Forgiveness” at Germantown Mennonite Church, 21 W. Washington Lane. Mariah will focus on forgiveness as a life-changing act that can be an antidote to depression, anxiety and shame.

Mariah explained that forgiveness is a multifaceted process. A person who feels the pain of going through a hurt or betrayal often feels anger or resentment. “If they don't have a way to constructively express that, it can stay lodged in their body as bitterness or numbness. We have to retrace their feelings and then work towards forgiveness.” She emphasized that forgiveness does not mean exonerating behavior. “Instead, it is understanding how the offender, given his or her life's journey, could have made such a hurtful mistake. It is a decision to put down a very heavy weight that you've been carrying; it's about having mercy on yourself and letting go. It may or not help the offender, but it will definitely help you.”

Mariah, who grew up in Rosemont, received a bachelor of arts in English from Temple University in 1970 and an M.S. degree in social work from Bryn Mawr College in 1972.

Ron works full time at the Pennsylvania Gestalt Center, where he puts the workshops together and handles the marketing, advertising and financials. “I’m the background guy, the cook and bottle washer,” he said. He is also president of the Mariah Fenton Gladis Foundation, whose mission is to offer programs that will bring a sense of love, compassion and forgiveness to individuals, families and communities.

The couple have two sons, Luke, an independent entrepreneur, and Cole, a film producer who is in the process of creating a documentary about Mariah’s life.

What does the future hold? Mariah would like to hook up with physicist Stephen Hawking, who was diagnosed with ALS in 1963 and who, like Mariah, was given two years to live. Ron said that Mariah envisions a collaboration of some kind, “with Stephen looking at the far reaches of outer space and Mariah looking at the far reaches of inner space. We’d like to make that happen somehow.”

To register for the workshop, visit mfgfoundation.org or call **610-647-4754**.