

A woman who enlightened: Stony Creek sculptor Joy Wulke dies at 65

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IT WAS A ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE on a 136,000-acre cattle ranch in Two Dot, Mont. Most of us would have dismissed the early 20th-century structure as abandoned, dilapidated. Not Joy Wulke, the internationally renowned sculptor and environmental artist who died last week from cancer at 65.

Wulke, a champion of public art, was the founder of the two decades-old Projects for a New Millennium. She was honored just this past December at the Arts Council of Greater New Haven 2013 Arts Awards luncheon, titled "In the Wings" for her visionary work fusing art, science and ecology in her breathtaking installations.

Well before that in 1981, Wulke discovered the schoolhouse while teaching nearby. For the next 22 years, she returned to the site again and again. "The Great Alone," her book of photo essays documenting its degenerative return to the earth, is housed in Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

As she observed plants and wildflowers wandering and weaving their



One of Wulke's laser shows in the Stony Creek Quarry. Contributed photo.

way through the decomposing structure, with the sun filtering through yawning planks and infusing the building with unintended beauty, "I began to think of how we age, how the physical being starts to deteriorate but at the same time our minds — hopefully — become more enlightened," the Long Beach, Calif. native said in her Stony Creek studio in 2010. That might in part explain how, even in the cross-



Joy Wulke in a most recent photo at the Arts Council awards luncheon in December 2013. Photo by Harold Shapiro.

hairs of a devastating illness, the 1974 gradu-



The late artist Joy Wulke is shown in her Stony Creek studio in 2010. File photo by Brad Horrigan. Wulke was known far and wide for spectacular laser light shows in the Stony Creek Quarry, a blend of art in the natural world.

ate of the Yale School of Architecture, described by longtime neighbor Francine Farkas Sears as a woman of "indomitable spirit with a warmth that shone through," continued her work on various projects with the assistance of her daughter, Gioia Connell, an artist and fabricator.

Among them was the production of a multimedia event deploying theatrical lighting, dancers and singers against the cavernous backdrop of the Stony Creek Quarry walls slated for this June, Wulke told NPR's Faith Middleton last September.

"I feel like I never really lost my focus once I got my diagnosis," she said, of her decades-long mission to translate into works of art what she saw in the natural world.

"Actually, I find my work far more interesting than what my physical condition happens to be right now." As for her decision to go forward with the June 2014 event, "I told my team 'why not?'" she said. "Everything was already in place."

Her determination to keep going, in spite of the gathering shadow of her disease, came as no surprise to Istvan B'Racz, the acclaimed local composer who collaborated with Wulke on similar visual and sensory spectacles at the quarry in 1999 to coincide with the New Haven International Festival of Arts and Ideas, as well as in 2002 and 2005, and on the Branford Green in 2009.

"It was never about her," he said in a phone interview, adding that she made it a practice to

ensure everyone involved in a production was paid before she was. "It was always about how we, our team, could make people see at once the majesty of nature and at the same time how fragile it all is, which might in turn get them to recognize the need to protect and preserve it."

In the end, then, Joy Wulke's mission goes on. It was about the one-room schoolhouse, but also what it left behind. Likewise, the June spectacular at the Quarry. "She won't be there," said B'Racz, "but her spirit, her beautiful, generous, artistic spirit, will."

To honor and perpetuate Joy Wulke's work, donations may be made by check to Projects for a New Millennium and sent to 26 Prospect Hill Road, Branford.