June Callwood
A Supernova in Our Midst
by Janice KAYE and Beth McBLAIN

“We are living proof that one individual can single-handedly accomplish the impossible in an uncaring world”
- Pierre Berton

She was born in June, christened June Callwood — journalist, author, civil libertarian, visionary, world-changer and is indeed a force of nature. At 82, she still has eyes that dance with an inner light related more to the peaks than the valleys in her life. She has suffered unspeakable loss. She has also won the right to call herself a hero in the battle against HIV/AIDS. That she would never do so says much about June Callwood.

In 1985, Callwood and some other good friends cared for Margaret Frazer as she died of pancreatic cancer. Callwood, writing for the Globe and Mail at the time, became interested in palliative care, an idea that came to life as a book entitled Twelve Weeks in Spring. It outlined how much about June Callwood.

Callwood now faced the challenge of convincing others to help her make the vision a reality. Many people feel helpless when confronted with a social problem as large as AIDS. June Callwood doesn’t have that problem. Because AIDS crosses socio-economic lines, so does June Callwood. “How many young people were dying!” she remembered. She went to every length and every community to drum up support. And the community and the government responded, with a million dollars from Ontario to buy the downtown Victorian house. At a 1987 “Tribute to June” fundraising dinner, a thousand admirers gathered for her birthday celebration. That evening alone raised $115,000 with the support of companies, foundations and individuals.

Casey House was named for Callwood’s son (with her husband of 62 years, legendary sportswriter Trent Frayne) who died “24 years and three months ago… not that I think about it very much,” she said with an ironic smile. At age 20, and in his third year at Queen’s University, Casey was hit by a drunken driver, struck down in the prime of life. It resonated with Callwood, she said, that “so many young men dying of AIDS were being struck down in the prime of their lives.” She named Casey House not only for her own son but also for all the parents who were losing their children as well. A cloud briefly crossed her normally sunny features as she admitted, “It was and still is an unbearable tragedy.”

Casey House admitted its first client in the spring of 1988, incorporating Callwood’s three pillars of the residential hospice. First, the care is more personal and specialized than in hospitals. Secondly, the choices are those of the client. Studies show more than 80 percent of people would like to die at home, given the choice. So if a patient wants a certain kind of comfort food from their childhood, or anything else the kitchen can accommodate, it shall be provided. Thirdly, the staff of 70, including a chaplain, is not only happy to be working there, whether paid or volunteer, but they also show it in their cheerfulness.

One of the highlights of the many low-key celebrity visits was that of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1991. The princess’ common touch was well known. Callwood remembered the tall beauty reaching out to touch a client. She sat with him, hugged him, talked and finally kissed him goodbye. It was more than a lovely gesture. At a time when little was known about AIDS, and patient pariahs were denied even their human rights, it was a revolutionary moment. The media captured it and another corner was turned. Princess Diana had made it OK to touch people with AIDS.

“We also had a client who was deaf,” remembered Callwood. “You could tell from her face that she was sad and felt left out.” When Princess Di found out the young woman was deaf, she immediately started to communicate with her, and the resident lit up like a lightbulb. Just one more aspect of Diana many hadn’t heard about — she could sign fluently.

Callwood was already legendary in Toronto for having founded Nellie’s Hostel for Women, Jessie’s Centre for Teenagers, and across Canada as a founding member and executive of the Writers’ Union of Canada, the Canadian Centre for Children and the Campaign Against Child Poverty. The Member, Officer and Companion of the Order of Canada has also been presented with Lifetime Achievement Awards from the Toronto Arts Foundation and the Canadian Journalism Federation as well as the Jane Jacobs Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005. Oh, and 18 honorary doctorates.

When asked what members of the public can do to help eradicate AIDS, Callwood suggested sponsoring events, setting up endowment funds, volunteering, and visiting the website for more information and suggestions. When asked why she does what she does, June Callwood answered, “Why else would we be on this planet if not to help each other?”

For more information, visit: www.caseyhouse.com, www.AIDS2006.org

The Scribe tribe: Berton, Cameron, Farquharson, Atwood and June in 1987.