

UPFRONT

News Desk: 780.460.5510
 Other inquiries: 780.460.5500
 E-mail: gazette@stalbert.greatwest.ca
 Web: www.stalbertgazette.com

TWO NEW SCHOOLS

Two city schools are underway in Jensen Lakes subdivision. See page 9.

Earth Mother remembered

Memorial set for March 24 for Elke Blodgett

BY SCOTT HAYES
Staff Writer

On Elke Blodgett's fridge, there's a quote by environmental essayist Edward Abbey that has some sage advice to activists about being a "reluctant enthusiast," which he defined as a part-time crusader, half-hearted fanatic.

"It is not enough to fight for the land; it is even more important to enjoy it."

I think of that often in reminiscence over the renowned artist and environmentalist most of us knew simply as Elke. She passed away unexpectedly on Feb. 15, the bitter result of a massive heart attack after a long and full life. She was 81. Frankly, I thought she would live much, much longer.

She was known as the keeper of the city's environment. Everybody knew that she fought for the land. She did so for the sake of keeping it healthy and thriving but also so that we all could enjoy it as much as she did. Boy, did she ever.

Many regarded her dismissively as a tree hugger, though I never once observed her doing so. Yes, she had a substantial garden and fed carrot peels to the neighbourhood rabbits. She also had a love of handpicked dandelions, mushrooms and other earthly edibles. She held herbicides in great disdain. She could tell you about the weeds and berries; better yet, she would let you know where to find a good patch of them and how to cook them.

She was my neighbour too and a vigilant witness to the natural world. As often as possible, she would visit the Sturgeon River and Big Lake, mostly to just observe the sunset. Her photos of them have been seen and shared for years through friends and social media, reminding us all of the beauty just outside our doors if we would only look. I swear I never even knew where Big Lake was until I moved to her block. You can still see her photos at www.elkeblodgett.net.

Far too often, her walks came back with reports on the water level, substances spilled in the water, damage to the wetland, untoward chemical usage, animal injuries or deaths, or other ecological issues. City staffers certainly had heard from her many times over the years, often to their chagrin. She told me that even this newspaper stopped printing her letters a few years ago. If

some called her tree hugger then many others considered her a prickly thorn in their sides.

And rightly so as the truth is often unpleasant. She called people out when and where needed. She was the one who pointed at the damage and said, "That's wrong." She gathered signatures on petitions and taught schoolkids about the world but she never once organized a blockade. She called politicians and government agencies and community organizations and wrote many letters, offering the full force of her knowledge and determination, not to mention her willingness to make enemies if it at least meant fixing something. But she never once tied herself to a tree.

"She was a mother, artist, shit-disturber. I keep looking for a more tasteful synonym, but there really isn't one," said Edmonton author Astrid Blodgett, one of Elke's three children.

She, along with her brother Gunnar and sister Kirsten grew up in the Grandin house that Elke and poet E.D. (Ted) Blodgett bought in the mid-1960s. Elke was born in Leipzig, Germany, the daughter of an environmental chemical engineer who once figured out how to turn industrial ash and make cinder blocks for construction. She moved all over Europe before immigrating to North America, settling here.

She might have followed in her father's footsteps forged by science, environmentalism and art, but she made a trail of her own by finding, reusing, and repurposing materials for her own art and for other practical applications. The first home she built was one she made from scavenged bricks. She was 10. She later built a place she called the woodhouse out of similar discarded construction materials, even tools she salvaged. It was said that she could build the best kilns out of nothing.

"She was a great scrounger," said longtime friend and artistic colleague Carol Stanton. "We used to go up to the old brickyard. She would dig around and find bits and pieces and old kiln bricks. They had all that rubble sitting around. The brickyard was no longer functioning. We used to have so much fun. She was quite a character."

She offered one story about how Elke courted disaster while doing raku in an electric kiln in the basement at home. The piece she was working on was siz-



APRIL BARTLETT/St. Albert Gazette

HONOURS – Elke Blodgett as seen in this photo from 2011 when she earned an International Women's Day Award, one of many honours she received for achievements in her lifetime.

able as was her wont. Elke was not a tall woman. Raku involves heating the pot up to 1,000°C and then putting it into an airtight vessel with combustible leaves or paper that add dramatic and unpredictable effects to the work. She had this vessel in her backyard.

"The glaze is melting; the pot is red-hot. She would put on every bit of clothing that she had and asbestos gloves,

and grab these pots out of the kiln, and run up the stairs with them. In doing this one day, she tripped on the stairs and dropped the pot. It's a wonder she didn't burn the house down."

She also recalled one special kiln that they built, again out of scraps. While the raku was cooking, so was their chicken and potato dinner.

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 Suite 333, 7 St. Anne Street
 St. Albert, AB T8N 2X4
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