

Three women, three journeys: one celebration of living well with diabetes

Billi J. Miller
Special to *Respect*

It started as a discussion over “diaversaries,” a blending of the number of years living with Type 1 Diabetes (T1D). It was a big year for Marti King-Coburn and Julie Evans. Marti was marking 25 years living with the disease, and Julie was to mark 50.

They considered honouring their journeys with a small gathering at Julie’s. They also wanted to celebrate the journey of another community member, Catherine Willis. She was marking her 60th year with T1D. After some discussion and planning, however, they soon realized they would need a larger location!

What resulted on November 8 at Kitscoty Community Hall was a beautiful evening that included sharing a meal, learning about T1D, and hearing touching stories about these three women’s nothing-short-of-remarkable journeys highlighting strength, resilience, and pride. And they celebrated it with 130 of their biggest supporters: none of whom remembers hearing of a “Living Well with Diabetes” celebration before.

The night included dancing and even a video message from Canadian country musician George Canyon, who was diagnosed with T1D himself at the age of 14.

Marti King-Coburn, 25 years with T1D

For Marti, a 26-year-old wife, mother, and day-home operator, “25 years of living with T1D is something that should be celebrated. It’s an around-the-clock job that I never get a moment away from.”

Marti was diagnosed on January 4, 2000 at the age of 15 months, after her doctor noticed her breath smelled of acetone. She remembers the red-striped pajamas from her initial hospital stay and the start of lifelong insulin therapy.

Over the years, her diabetes management evolved with technology. By 2023, she was using her 26th insulin pump (an Omnipod) alongside a continuous glucose monitor. In 2025, she began “Looping,” using an app that mimics her pancreas.

Later this winter Marti plans to release a children’s book, *Mommy Has Diabetes*, to share her story.

Marti’s mother, Rebecca (Becky) King, spoke about her experience as a parent and caregiver of a young child with T1D — a story that touched Catherine Willis deeply.

“The one person that I really appreciated... was Becky,” Catherine said. “She definitely spells it the way it is, like she had me in tears... up in the middle of the night with poking fingers, and then trying to figure out the food. So little was known about it when I got it.”

Catherine Willis, 60 years with T1D

Catherine Willis’s journey with Type 1 Diabetes began in 1961, at just five years old, after slipping into a diabetic coma. With little understanding from family or the medical system, managing her illness was full of challenges. Strict dietary restrictions left her constantly hungry—so desperate that she recalls once eating a banana - peel and all “right down to the little brown nub”.

Hospital stays

were frequent, insulin therapy was painful and imprecise, and given via reusable needles in her arms. It caused tissue damage that took 15 years to heal. Catherine’s childhood meant leaving birthday parties early, avoiding sleepovers, and hiding injection scars.

Despite these obstacles, Catherine persevered. “They advised me way back when not to have children... I said, No, I’m having kids. I’ll deal... You’ve got to let me try.” She would go on to have three children.

Summing up her journey, she said, “I guess that I have done everything in life that I ever wanted to do. And, yeah, I feel very blessed.”



Living well: Julie Evans (left), Marti King-Coburn, and Catherine Willis. **BILLI J. MILLER**

Julie Evans, 50 years with T1D

Julie’s journey began in 1975. Julie was diagnosed and spent about a week in

St. Mary’s Hospital in Camrose, learning to practice injections on an orange. Diabetes care then was unforgiving: boiling syringes before

each use, plungers sometimes shattered, and insulin (made from beef and pork) was absorbed unpredictably. *Continued on Page 8*

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Living well with diabetes *continued*

Continued from Page 7

Progress came slowly. In 1982, she saw her first real-time blood glucose reading at a small lab in Outlook, Saskatchewan. By the late 80s, she had her first insulin pen and home glucose monitor, which required a much larger blood sample than today’s tiny samples.

Adult milestones included a diabetic pregnancy in 2000, frequent drives to Edmonton, and the birth of a baby girl despite being told her antepartum risk was starkly high.

A reason to celebrate

Julie reflected on the long path that brought the three women together: “I wanted to honour my journey and celebrate the effort Marti and Catherine have also put into living well with T1 Diabetes,” she said.

She hoped the evening would remind the community “to come together to celebrate our strengths and our successes,” and left feeling “so proud of myself and so grateful to the people who have stood with me.”

“There were several moments that affirmed the purpose of the night. I had a blast! Fun was the goal!” Julie said. Recreating a 50-year-old photo with cousins brought laughter. “I didn’t have a clue what I was up against and the impact diabetes would have on my life,” she said, adding “It does not define me... It’s shown me the importance of persistence, that I need others, and that it’s okay to be vulnerable.”

Marti felt the night was equally meaningful. “I deserved to raise a glass and share our



Syringe-shaped cookies show a certain defiant humour. **BILLIJ. MILLER**

stories with our T1D... they had such biggest supporters, our passion in their eyes friends and family.” That was raw and real. Her biggest takeaway They had to boil their came from “watching needles to sanitize my diabetic them as little girls, I mentors, Julie and had an insulin pump! Cathy, speak about It made me so grateful their experience with for their guidance

as I walk through my T1D journey.”

A late-night table conversation with seasoned diabetics and their families became a defining moment for her. “We all had crazy stories about our lives and incidents with T1D that were hilarious and jaw-dropping,” she said. “It was my ‘this is why we did this’ moment. I felt seen.”

Looking back, she shared, “I am so proud that after 25 years of a disease that was given to me, I crushed almost all of the ‘you can’t do this’ or ‘this will be incredibly difficult’ barriers... I went to school without a teacher’s aide, I played sports like hockey and basketball, I found the love of my life, I have a beautiful baby girl, and so many others.”

With 60 years of experience, Catherine Willis echoed that spirit: “I really hope that people think that just because you got diabetes doesn’t mean life’s going to end. You know, you got one life. Get out there and live it, like don’t let diabetes rule your life. Do the best you can and listen to what your doctors advise you, but don’t let it rule you. You’ll miss out, and you don’t get time back. That is true.”

A note from the organizers:

A note from Julie, Marti and Catherine: “This event was not intended to be a fundraiser but a chance to celebrate with friends and family. As an unintended consequence, we inspired people to donate to Diabetes Canada. The response was overwhelming. We are so grateful. We’ve decided to put these donations toward D Camps (www.diabetes.ca/d-camps).”

The Roundup

Bonnyville Seniors’ Drop-In Centre

- Mondays:** Chair Yoga 11:30 am PH
Floor Curling 1:00 pm MH
Tuneagers 7:00 pm PH
- Tuesdays:** Canasta 1:00 pm PR
Crib 1:00 pm MH
Pool 7:00 pm PR
- Wednesdays:** OFFICE CLOSED
Chair Yoga 11:30 am MH
Bridge 1:00 pm PR
Floor Curling 7:00 pm MH
- Thursdays:** Mahjong 9:30 am L
Floor Curling 1:00 pm MH
- Fridays:** OFFICE CLOSED
Pool 9:00 am, PR
Commander League 6 pm PR
- Wednesday, November 26:**
Beltone 10:00 am to 1:00 pm
D&D 6:00 pm PR
- Friday, Saturday, Sunday, November 28, 29, 30:**
MH Booked for Private Event
- LEGEND** - Kitchen K, Library L, McGregor Hall - MH, Pioneer Hall - PH, Pool Room - PR, Dungeons & Dragons - D&D, TBD - To be determined

Cold Lake Seniors’ Society

- Mondays:** 9:30 am Chair Yoga
1:00 pm Euchre
- Tuesdays:** 9:30 am Line Dancing
10:00 am Billiards
11:00 am Darts
1:00 pm Bingo
- Thursdays:** 9:30 am Exercise Class
1:00 pm Floor Curling
1:00 pm Corn Hole
1:00 pm Bridge
- Fridays:** 10:00 am Billiards
11:00 am Darts
1:00 pm Crib
- Wednesday, November 26:**
Birthday Potluck 5:00 pm
- Thursday, November 27:**
No Exercise Class
- Friday, November 28:**
Mexican Train 7:00 pm

Gamblers Anonymous

- Mondays and Wednesdays:**
7:00 pm Anglican Church Hall, 4808 50th Ave., Cold Lake, AB 780-207-5758

LaCorey Seniors Hall

- Tuesdays:** 1:00 pm Floor Curling

St. Paul Legion Branch 100

- Tuesday and Thursday Mornings:**
Coffee & comradeship 8:00 to 10:00 am

St. Paul Senior Citizens Club

- Mondays:** 1:00 pm Ladies’ Floor Curling
- Tuesdays:** 1:00 pm Canasta
- Wednesdays:** 9:30 am Carpet Bowling
1:00 pm Crib
- Thursdays:** 9:30 am (3 games)
Mixed Floor Curling
7:00 pm Choir (Musicos)
- Tuesdays & Thursdays:**
Line Dancing
- Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays:**
Quilting Bees Guild

