

MARK CONLON

Died June 15, 2015

Focused his life on fighting disease, raising awareness

By Megan Henney
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At the end of May, Mark "Rusty" Conlon was selling hot dogs at a furniture store, trying to raise awareness for a disease that would take his life in less than a month.

"It takes a lot of power for someone to accept their own mortality," said Morgan McLane, a friend of Mr. Conlon's and fellow member of the Western Pennsylvania Chapter of the Huntington's Disease Society of America. "The world of advocacy has lost such a wonderful person and a wonderful asset."

Mr. Conlon, formerly of Green Tree, died Monday. He was 47.

He was diagnosed in 2008 with Huntington's, a genetic disease in which nerve cells waste away. But friends and family say it never took away his spirit.

"Every night, I would tuck him into bed and I would ask him if he had a good day," said his wife, Patty. "He was always positive. He would say, 'It was a great day because I was here, home with you.'"

Mr. Conlon got involved in the Huntington's disease organization shortly after his diagnosis, something that became a focus in his life.

"The guy always had a smile on his face. He was a power," Mr. McLane said. "He would walk into a room, and he would literally make people light up."

In part, the advocacy work that he was so passionate about relates to his children, Zachary and

Meghan, both of whom are at risk for having the incurable disease, said Mr. McLane's mother, Pat, who knew Mr. Conlon from her involvement with the organization.

"I think he knew at this point that he needed to do this for his children, not only for himself," Ms. McLane said. "He was very involved with the support meetings and knew people down there, and that became important to him."

Although the disease took away Mr. Conlon's ability to be physically involved in the lives of his children, he never missed a chance to celebrate their accomplishments, Ms. Conlon said.

And before his death, Mr. Conlon took steps to ensure that his brain would be donated to Huntington's research, she said.

"His effort is going to continue, which is kind of in his nature — he just keeps wanting to give back," Ms. Conlon said. "It was something that was very, very important to him."

In addition to his wife and children, Mr. Conlon is survived by his mother, Dorothy, and a sister, Rita Bradley.

His funeral Mass and burial are scheduled for later in Massachusetts. The family suggests contributions to the Huntington's Disease Society of America Western Pennsylvania Chapter, P.O. Box 1196, Coraopolis, PA 15108.

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