

BULLETIN

From union activism to fighting bears

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Retired lab tech makes national news by fending off bear attack

by LAURA BUSHEIKIN



uring her 28-year career as a medical technologist, retired HSA member Jane Tillotson was regularly involved in saving lives with her professional skills. But her most celebrated life-saving act came a year after her retirement.

This time, it was her own -mama-bear" ... or, more accurately, -grandma-bear" ... instincts that gave her the power to scare off a bear that was chasing her fouryear- old granddaughter.

The attack happened in her own backyard just 10 miles out of Nelson, where Tillotson had worked for 23 years at Kootenay Lake Hospital. Tillotsons two granddaughters, Megan and Chloe, had just arrived for a week-long visit.

-I decided to take them outside. I was doing a bit of weeding and they were running around playing. Then I heard Megan call â€˜Nana and I turned and looked. She was coming up the stairs to me and there was a big black bear right on her heels.

-Just as I was taking this in, he swiped at her and got the back of her calf. I saw a big gash and she fell down right in front of him. Thats when instinct kicked in. I just raced at them and scooped her up. The bear reached out and swiped again and caught my calf and Megans belly ... I was holding her by then ... at the same time. I was screeching at the top of my lungs trying to get him to leave.

-Luckily Chloe was behind me. I was backing up, shrieking at the bear, and the bear was still following us. It seemed like forever that we were there face to face with me yelling before it decided to turn around and leave the garden. I then picked up Chloe and ran to the house with one girl under each arm," she says.

The bear was still close by when Tillotson left the house soon after the attack to get medical attention, and hadnt left when the conservation officer arrived 45 minutes later to shoot the bear.

-I think that bear was after Megan. He had spotted her there and she was small and slow-moving, and when I saw him he was moving pretty fast to get her," says Tillotson.

The experience has left Tillotson feeling both proud and horrified.

-I like to think it was me in my mama-bear mode that made the bear leave, but I know we were so fortunate. It

could have gone so badly. For a while afterwards I couldn't sleep. I was thinking about the whatifs. What if I'd let them go out and play by themselves? What if they'd been in a different part of the garden?"

Those anxieties have receded since the attack. And Megan's wounds, which luckily were not deep, have healed. The media attention, too, which took Tillotson by surprise, has died down.

Jane Tillotson Medical Technologist (retired) Nelson
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"I guess I was kind of naïve about the extent of media interest," says Tillotson with a laugh. She gave an interview to the local paper, thinking that would be that. But it wasn't

—Once it was in one paper it went out all over the country. I had phone calls from all sorts of media outlets. I gave an interview to CBC but then I said no to quite a few interview requests.

—But HSA is different," she adds quickly. —It has kind of been my life. I'm happy to tell the story again for HSA members."

Leadership and union activism



During her two-and-a-half decades as an HSA member, Jane Tillotson held a variety of positions: Steward, Member-at-Large, Chair of the Equality Rights Committee, member of the Education, Bargaining and Long Term Disability Committees, and Director.

Tillotson certainly hadn't planned such a long and industrious union career when she first got involved. —I just kind of got roped in at first. I was told we need a steward and you haven't done it before, so why don't you?" she says, laughing.

—But luckily, one of the first things that happened is that I received a scholarship to the CLC Winter School and took a course on Women and Leadership. It opened my eyes to union activism. That one week changed my opinion of what it meant to be a union member. I met so many people from so many unions and from such diverse backgrounds. I realized our union was part of a much bigger picture," she says.

She also realized that union activism was not just a duty, but in fact had much to offer.

—You'd be amazed at the opportunities available once you do become involved. You never stop learning with a union. I learned about parliamentary procedure, public speaking, racism, human rights ... all those courses gave me skills I've used for my whole career. I say never stop learning. It's important for your whole life to keep your mind active."

For example, she says, she enjoyed the challenges she faced as a member of the union's Long Term Disability Committee so much that she stayed on the Committee (now the LTD Board of Trustees) for approximately six years, becoming its longest-serving member. —I joined when it was formed in 1989 after HSA negotiated for control of the LTD plan. I loved that. We were learning everything there was to know about LTD plans. It was a huge responsibility, and it was fascinating," she says. Another personal highlight with HSA was sitting on the 1989 bargaining committee.

—It was an amazing process to sit at the table and see how it worked, and to have input into that."

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