

Shelley and Herb Lazarus keep their son's memory alive by supporting the battle against pulmonary disease.

Remembering Robert

The chest X-ray Robert David Lazarus underwent that summer of 1979 was just a routine requirement for starting college—except that it revealed the outgoing, boyishly handsome 18-year-old had a Hodgkin's lymphoma on his heart.

Two surgeries and 30 days of radiation treatment later, Robert finally began classes at the University of Denver, where he went on to become student body president. After graduation, he launched a successful career in cable television, then moved on to further success in the dot-com industry.

Cancer-free and healthy for more than two decades, Robert started experiencing shortness of breath around his 40th birthday. The radiation that saved his life as a teenager had also caused irreparable lung damage.

For the next three years, he battled diminishing lung capacity with regular visits to Cedars-Sinai for pulmonary rehabilitation. There he founded and led a support group for patients with pulmonary disease. Sadly, his lung tissue was too damaged to support a transplant, and Robert died in March 2005, at age 43. The support group honored him by placing an empty chair in their circle, a tradition that continues to this day.

"The emotional and physical support Robert received from the group and from the staff in the

rehabilitation unit was tremendous," says Shelley Lazarus, Robert's mother. She is an award-winning artist and one of the founders of The Artists' Gallery (TAG) in Santa Monica's Bergamot Station. "They encouraged him, befriended him, and were there for him in every way."

Shelley and her husband, Herb Lazarus, started a memorial fund to raise money for the rehabilitation unit, which they have supported in part with sales of Shelley's art. Earlier this year, they made a planned gift to Cedars-Sinai to dedicate the facility to Robert. "In part, we did this as a thank you to the hospital," says Herb, who is president of international distribution at Carsey-Werner. "But we were really trying to keep Robert's name in the community where people would be getting help for pulmonary disease."

The country-style home in Woodland Hills where Shelley and Herb raised their three sons—Sid, Robert, and Michael—brims with memories of family life and 54 years of marriage. The family moved into the four-bedroom house when Robert was a 12-year-old Boy Scout after Herb's job moved them from New York to Los Angeles.

The walls are covered in art, much of it created by Shelley. In the family room hangs a large portrait of Robert that Shelley painted shortly after he died. In the beautifully rendered



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By Kim Kowsky

I shaved," he says. "I always saw something new."

An avid reader of mystery novels, Herb also takes pleasure in a good joke, even at his own expense. He describes Robert as "a bit of a prankster" and lights up at the recollection of how his son once coached co-workers at Turner Pictures to pretend they were in an earthquake during a teleconference with their Atlanta bosses. "He had everyone bouncing around, acting like it was nothing, while everyone on the other side was freaking out," Herb says with a laugh.

Shelley and Herb were not surprised when Robert announced he was gay after returning from college. Shelley describes Robert's 16-year relationship with John Ferraro, a former Paramount Pictures movie executive turned independent producer, as "the best marriage in our family, a true love affair."

"John turned out to be the best man in the world," Herb adds. "He was with Robert every day, managed his medications, and was devoted to him—and for that we adore John."

One week before he died, Robert told John and his parents that he wanted to be buried at Hollywood Forever Cemetery and asked them to mark his grave with an obelisk. In a treasured spot in the family room is a framed photo of John standing beside the monument, which is etched with the words: "Loved by John." ●●

painting, Robert sits in a chair on his terrace talking into a phone while his dog looks out from a doorway. What's especially moving is the portrait's perspective: Shelley painted her son as if she were standing behind him. "I couldn't paint his face," Shelley says. "In fact, I saved his hair for last and had a problem painting that."

Looking artfully chic in her chunky jewelry and paint-spattered smock, Shelley is a quietly nurturing woman who keeps a child-sized easel for her

granddaughter in her studio. In memory of Robert, who had a Picasso peace dove tattooed onto his left ankle, the grandmother of two got the same tattoo on hers.

Herb cuts a trim and more traditional figure in his tucked-in golf shirt. Not surprisingly, he opted against the memorial tattoo. Herb is a great fan of Shelley's art, not letting his colorblindness interfere with his enjoyment of it. He admits to being disappointed when she moved his favorite watercolor out of the bathroom. "I liked to look at it when