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Q&A

Commercial real estate pro Lori Larson Heller's new calling is fighting a deadly disease

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Lori Larson Heller left behind a long and rewarding career in the Twin Cities commercial real estate industry earlier this year to follow her new calling: defeating ALS.

Also known as Lou Gehrig's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis entered Larson Heller's life in September 2018, when her husband, Jim Heller, a retired Opus Group president, was diagnosed with the disease, which causes the nerve cells that control muscles to gradually deteriorate. It currently has no cure.

Larson Heller, then an executive vice president with Dougherty Real Estate Equity Advisors, immediately quit her job to become his full-time caretaker.

Two weeks before Heller's death in May 2020, Larson Heller made a promise to her husband: She would do everything in her power to find a cure for ALS in her lifetime. She didn't know it then, but that promise would inspire the creation of the Jim Heller End ALS Memorial Fund.



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Tim Murnane, president and CEO of The Opus Group, presented Lori Larson with a \$225,000 check for the Jim Heller End ALS Memorial Fund in April. Larson, a former commercial real estate professional, has found a new calling battling ALS after the disease took the life of her husband, Jim Heller, a former Opus president.

In the weeks after it was created last year, Larson Heller's family and friends donated \$227,000 to the fund, which is directed by Larson Heller but held by the nonprofit Saint Paul & Minnesota Community Foundation. That amount was nearly doubled early this year when Opus agreed to donate \$225,000 in 2020 year-end profits to the fund.

Larson Heller, a 2018 Women in Business award winner, spoke recently with the Business Journal about her decision to take a new path in life. (For more information on the fund, or to donate, go to givemn.org/story/JimHeller.)

Can you tell me about the decision to quit your job when Jim got his diagnosis?

I have loved commercial real estate. It's been my life for 35 years or so. And yet, I just knew. There was a calling that moment.

I didn't realize how quickly Jim would decline. They tell you, you may have two to five years, but they also will tell you within a year you're probably in a wheelchair.

I didn't need to quit, but somebody was going to have to be a caregiver for Jim, and I didn't want that to be anybody but me.

Is fighting ALS your new career? Do you think of it that way?

People have asked me about that, like, 'Hey, did you resume your commercial real estate career?' And I say, 'No, I picked up a new ALS advocacy career.'

I spent one day in bed and didn't get out [after] Jim died. But I feel like I have this whole new purpose. I am so happy to get out of bed in the morning and hit the computer, hit the Zoom calls.

Now, with Covid getting better, I'll be traveling out to Boston a bunch because a lot of the money [from the fund] is going to a group called ALSTDI, which stands for ALS Therapy Development Institute. They are very well known in this arena, and they are really the foremost leader in nonprofit labs working solely on ALS. There are 20-some scientists working full time, around the clock, on pre-clinical drug development and research to try and move this thing forward.

When you do this work, do you feel like you're honoring your husband's legacy, in a way?

Very much. I and others I have found in grassroots efforts, we're the ones running toward the disease and not away from it, because we realize how horrible it is and how we really need to do something to get progress made in this area.

It's definitely my new purpose, and it has definitely been therapeutic and healing for me. I know I definitely would not be doing nearly as well as I'm doing without this, because it just gives me that purpose.

I feel like I'm honoring Jim, and I feel like he's with me every day I'm working on it.

Dylan Thomas

Reporter

Minneapolis / St. Paul Business Journal

