

Last year our community was stunned by loss of Eleanor MacDonald of Kyles, North Uist to a rare and aggressive cancer.

Ellie's mother Michelle has found a way through her pain to pay moving tribute to her inspirational daughter.

Michelle MacDonald

How does a mother write a tribute for her own daughter?

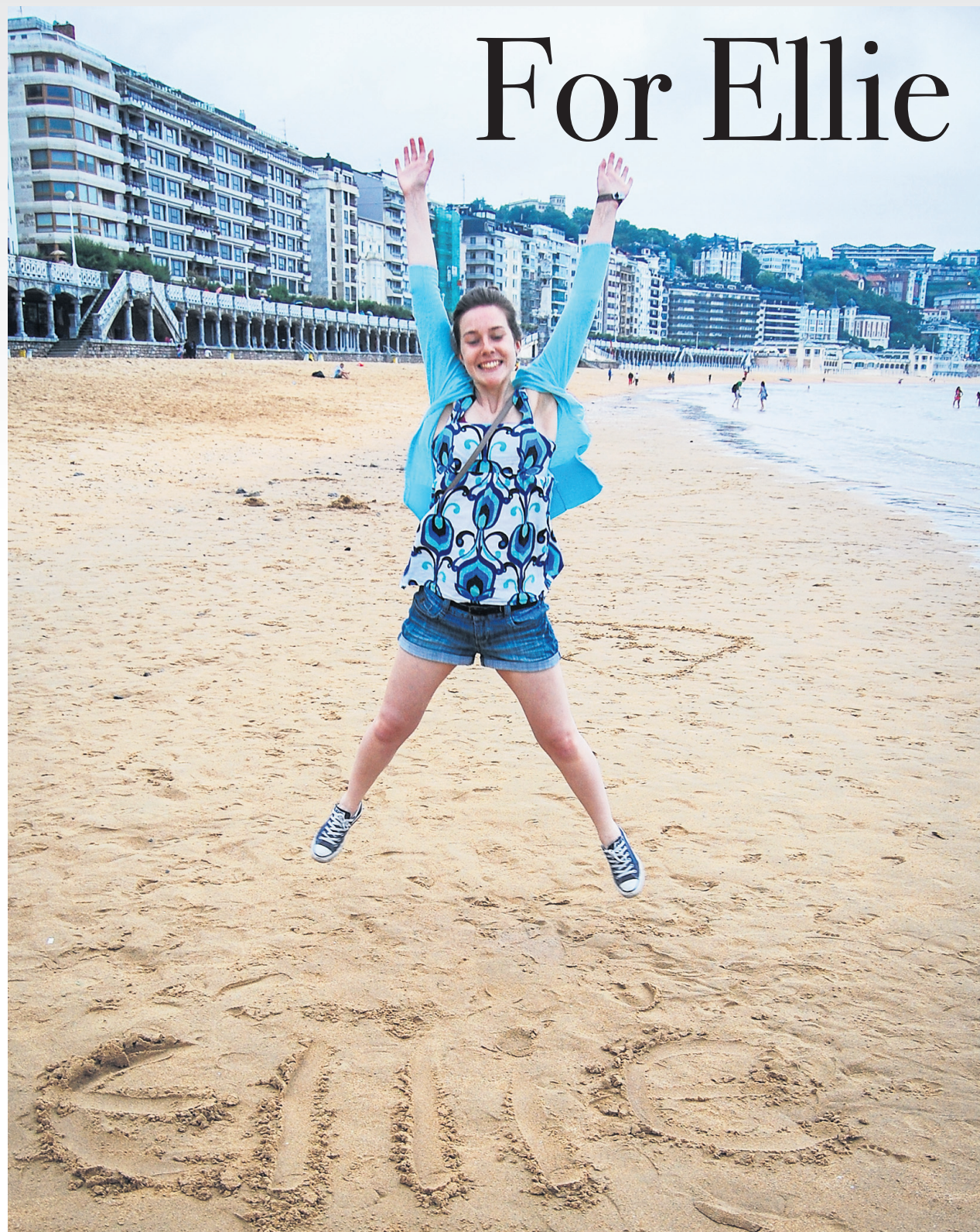
A daughter who was taken from her family and friends on the 18th September 2014, after a brave battle with cancer, at the tender age of 23. I know who she was and loved her dearly for the beautiful young woman she had become and so decided to use the words of her friends to guide me.

The words used most to describe Ellie are that she always had a beautiful smile and was very generous with her love; always thinking of others and putting them before herself. Gentle, warm and caring, she avoided conflict at all costs and when I was ill, she took on the responsibility of being "Mum no. 2" to Alexander, still a toddler, lovingly and with grace. Even after my recovery she kept the role going, always being patient and making time for Alexander as well as ensuring that he got away to see the other side of life - Cirque du Soleil, "The Lion King", Walking with Dinosaurs to name just a few.

Born on the 9th February 1991, on a Saturday, she was due to "work hard for a living" as the poem goes. I think that Tuesday or Friday would have been more appropriate days ("full of grace", "loving and giving") but Saturday it was and she did work hard at everything that she did. Always studious at school, she was also helpful around the house; sometimes more than she needed to be as Sarah, her younger sister, conned Ellie into bringing in the peats for weeks when her father had actually asked her to do the job. When old enough she worked at Langass Lodge whilst completing her Highers and at university, she worked at the Vine Leaf restaurant in St. Andrews.

When diagnosed in December 2013, her main concern was if she would be able to complete her degree; most of the staff told her that she would be too tired and she should concentrate on her treatment. However she was determined to finish her final year. Fortunately when her oncologist, Professor Alastair Munro, walked into her room on her initial consultation, the first thing that he did was to acknowledge her wishes and said that he would do everything in his power to help her finish her degree. From that moment on the two of them had a special relationship of mutual trust and respect. He is a great doctor who remembers every little detail about the patient and he would bring in books or spend time discussing Ellie's current essay when she was in for her treatment every three weeks.

Ellie duly graduated with a 2:1 in Business Management. This took grit, determination and hard work whilst attending hospital for her treatment and at the end I was very worried about her. She had completed a dissertation, sat her exams and had one catch up essay to complete which she did in bed looking so unwell and characteristically thinking her essay wasn't good enough - her final piece of work achieved a first grade! That result, and the news that she had completed her degree, was one of the happiest days of her life and gave her such a boost - she took some convincing that it was her work without any special consideration from the university that had



Ellie jumps for joy in Spain

achieved this! The support from friends, Dr John Desmond, her mentor and tutor, and Barbara Lessels helped her finish her year. Her Graduation day was a proud day for us all.

In true Ellie style she graduated, attended the Graduation Ball and then set off first thing in the morning with Robert, her wonderful boyfriend, to London en-route to Northern Spain by train as she wasn't allowed to fly. Ellie met Robert whilst an intern at Price



Ellie and her boyfriend Robert at her graduation ball

Waterhouse Coopers in the summer of 2013. She talked about someone she had met but they both had plans to travel; he wanted to move abroad once qualified and she was planning a year out to see the world before starting work. They met a few times and survived taking Alexander out for breakfast as he was embarrassing as little brothers can be. When Ellie received her diagnosis Robert was away for Christmas skiing with his parents but when he heard that she was unwell, he didn't run as some would have, instead he stood tall and behaved like a true gentleman supporting her all the way. They spent time together in Glasgow, London, St Andrews and Oxford; Ellie met Robert's friends and many of them did not even know she was ill. She wanted to be seen as normal and didn't want to attract pity, such was her character. They had a fantastic time in Spain and in August attended every venue (but one) at the Commonwealth Games. It was beautiful to see their feelings for each other grow and he had a way of calming Ellie when she became agitated. He was with her at the end and his love for her was plain to see. He will always have a special place in our hearts.

Her friends also spoke of her empathy, modesty, sensitivity, serenity and humble wisdom as well as her curious and adventurous nature. She loved to travel and had a keen interest in other cultures; her music playlist takes you all around the world through many different genres. When Ellie died, we discovered that the desktop picture on her laptop was of a person sitting on top of a mountain with the quote "Enjoy life now, it's not a rehearsal". She did that! She

For Ellie

Ellie with her brother Alexander in a portrait set up by Ellie, revealing her budding photographic talent



embraced the opportunities afforded to her - she was an au pair in Valencia, climbed Mount Kilimanjaro to raise money for Childreach and was the first woman in her group to make it to the top. Her visit to the Uru North Vocational Training Centre after her magnificent climb was described to me later as one of the best days of her life. She loved meeting the children; they always loved her, attracted to her quiet calmness. She kayaked across Scotland and travelled to many places with friends and still had plans to do even bigger and better things once recovered - as can be seen on her "Bucket List". She wrote this a few months before she died for her boyfriend Robert; he wrote his too and they were both surprised at how similar their lists were though Robert joked that her list would take an awful lot more funding! Her friends and family hope to work through her list in remembrance and if anyone else wants to take the challenge, then her father (Angus) and I would love to hear about it.

Ellie did not show me her final list; Robert shared it after she died. She had discussed whether or not to mention beating cancer as she thought that it might be a waste of one of her bullet points on her list (they had limited the number to ten) so I was surprised to see "Destroy Cancer" as number one. With the poise and grace of a ballerina, cancer was a cruel way to die but Ellie died with dignity

and fighting to live until the end whilst remaining polite and thoughtful towards the medical staff - they commented on it often.



The MacDonald family sharing happy times at a wedding. L to r Sarah, Fraser, Angus, Michelle and Ellie with Alexander in the front.

Cancer is a terrible disease that has no thought of age, gender or nationality and whilst many are treated successfully, there is still plenty of work to be done. We received £6,161.67 at Ellie's funeral and in cards sent through the post and her JustGiving site has raised £3,375.00 plus gift aid and all of this is going to Cancer Research. With the help of the community led by the North Uist Athletics Club and the North Uist Junior footballers, we're planning "Ellie's Fun Day" to raise more funds for Cancer Research. It is to be held in Sollas on the 20th June this year, so we hope that everyone will pencil that in their diaries and look out for more details of the fun we're planning.

Speaking of the community, I also wanted this to be a tribute to them. Ellie came home to be buried on the 23rd September. It had rained heavily before she came back, but as she drew nearer to home, the sun broke through the clouds and a butterfly came out to greet her. We wanted to celebrate Ellie's life and we were fortunate as on the next day, the sun shone bright, the older men in the community wore purple or something coloured (very unusual for an island funeral but a request by the family in honour of Ellie) and we were carried by the love of everyone who came. Her friends travelled from near and far, as did our family and friends and people from all over the islands. Her ceremony was in a marquee near the house (erected predominantly by the men from Sollas and the fish farms); three dear friends, Iain Graham, Niall MacDonald and Charlotte Muller gave wonderful eulogies and a Minister friend, Iain MacAskill lead the service so tenderly. A school friend played the guitar to two hymns and we had boards up full of pictures of Ellie doing what she did nearly all the time - smiling and being active. Purple was everywhere - her flowers and her kayak filled with heather, lavender and Scottish thistle. When she was brought out of the marquee, as we hugged and shook hands with hundreds, a butterfly fluttered above everyone and lingered. As we took the slow drive to the cemetery past Paible Primary School, Alexander's classmates were all standing outside in a line respectfully. It is a sight that is etched on the family's and everyone else's hearts.

After laying Ellie's body to rest, we and many others returned to the marquee to be fed by the community's ladies - a two course feast cooked and served by women from near and far; there were

comments that corporate functions are not so slick. Simone, a university friend, had put together a photo montage to music which was beautiful and quite an organisational feat as she had pictures from friends and family, home and away. As I said earlier, we were carried by the love and friendship shown to us on such a day and over the days before and after with the help offered and given and the food provided. Those who attended from all over the island, country and world, Ellie had many international friends, said that they had never experienced anything like it.

And so to the future which on many days seems impossible without her. Thank goodness for memories and many of them. I've painted a picture of an angel but Ellie had an edge, a prime example of this from her young days is when she bet Fraser that he couldn't climb the corn stack in the yard - something greatly frowned upon by those who built it. He did, and she thought that she could get out of paying him by telling on him! Fraser got his revenge later when she wanted to borrow some money and he attempted to charge her interest on her payments. People say that it must be a comfort knowing that she achieved so much; it is and it isn't as she had so much left to do and so many dreams to bring to fruition - she had not reached her prime yet.

The last word that has been used in abundance to describe Ellie is that she is an inspiration. Her friends say that the way she was as a person and the decisions she took in her final nine months inspire them and guide them when making their own decisions. She never gave up and lived each day as if it was her last. She was in Spain, kayaked at home and attended the Commonwealth Games just weeks before she died. Some of our friends who attended her funeral had been debating on whether to let their son go on a football trip as they felt that he was still a little young. After hearing about all the adventures that Ellie had had with the blessing of her parents, they decided that he should go and start seeing a little of the world independently. That possibly is Ellie's legacy; sometimes you need to take a risk, grab life and run with it for all it's worth.

I hope to ensure that as much money as possible can be raised to help "Destroy Cancer" and support those travelling the cancer journey. I am working on an idea, "A million miles for Ellie, a million pounds for cancer". I hope to use funds raised to support Cancer Research and Maggie's and I will let everyone know how I progress.

Ellie once said to me when feeling frustrated, "sometimes all I want to do is turn up the music and dance"; I hope that you, dear reader, are able to find your way of doing that too.



Ellie's Bucket List

1. Destroy Cancer.
2. Work/Volunteer with monkeys in a foreign country.
3. See as much of Latin America as possible (& some crazy volcanos).
4. Take part in a sailing expedition.
5. See the Northern Lights in Iceland (and more volcanos).
6. Climb another mountain (preferably Aconcagua, but many other mountains are also cool).
7. Backpack through SE Asia.
8. Pass my driving test and go on a crazy road trip.
9. Volunteer somewhere remote.
10. Go to a major sport event e.g. Olympics or World Cup.