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Running for Lisa in the Branford Road Race June 19

By Lisa Reisman
 Special to the Times

Her laugh was so full-throated, so hearty, so joyous that it echoed from the front door to the locker rooms and all the way to the elliptical trainers at the back of the warehouse-sized gym. It rose above the booming sound system. It was one of a kind. It was contagious. It put a smile on your face.

As early as 4:30 a.m. At the Branford Road Race on June 19, Planet Fitness will celebrate the life of Lisa Pelosi who died suddenly from a heart attack last November at 48. At the request of her family, the American Heart Association is accepting donations in her name to raise money for research and prevention locally.

Those who raise \$100 or more will gain free entry to the race. For more information, visit active.com/donate/Lisa2011.

"I loved starting my day talking to her," said Kristin Nelson, a Branford teacher who works out every morning at 5:30 a.m. "You felt like you could share anything with her."

Amanda Tosetti, who shared the horseshoe-shaped front counter with Pelosi twice a week, summed up the consensus from her boss, co-workers, and members: "She had this magnetism that drew people to her. She might have had an ordinary job but she definitely made the most of it. She was a one-of-a-kind, larger-than-life person."

Quite simply, the

mother of three and grandmother of seven transformed the morning hours of what might have been another faceless fitness chain along Route 1 into a friendly "Cheers"-like atmosphere where she, quite literally, knew everyone's name.

Not just their names, according to Lisa Kurpit of Skinsations, a spa in Guilford, and another early-morning regular. "She came up with her own nickname for you and gave you more warmth and attention than a lot of people you know. Every single day." More than that, she seemed genuinely interested in everyone, from their families to their tattoos to sharing her recipe for Italian macaroni pie.

In short, at a gym known for its no-frills,

low monthly fees, Pelosi provided value that could not be quantified. She personified the tolerance and inclusiveness on which Planet Fitness was founded, said co-owner Mike Katz, Jr.

"From the beginning, the morning was hers," said Katz, whose father Mike Katz, Sr. and Jerry Mastrangelo started the business in 1979. "She made everyone feel at home." Not least the younger staff members. According to Katz, "for them, she was like a Mom."

Kristina Ferrara, 25, another of Pelosi's co-workers, agreed. "It was almost as if she had this sixth sense of caring," she said. "She always knew if something was wrong, even if it was the smallest thing."

Which is why a sign hangs on the front doors encouraging members to "run for a cause" in the Branford Road Race by

supporting the AHA in Lisa's name; why a collection can sits on the front counter adorned with Lisa's open, beaming face; and, not least, why the fitness center organized a "Secret Santa" event for

Pelosi's grandchildren and plans to do so next year and every year after that.

It's really quite simple, said Katz. "Lisa always took care of us. We want to honor her life and spir-

it by taking care of her kids and grandkids. And not just last year and this year. Forever."

The sound system still



A memorial for Lisa Pelosi hangs at Planet Fitness in Branford. Photo by Brad Horrigan

pounds its upbeat music. The barbells clang. The elliptical machines whirl. But somehow it's quieter. "I took her hours," Amanda Tosetti said softly, "but not her place."