

The New Zealand Herald

Polly Gillespie: Losing my sister to the flu

By [Polly Gillespie](#) @pollygillespie

7:00 AM Monday May 2, 2016

I'm not sure if it was imaginary or not but, preceding my father's first stroke and my sister's sudden fatal bout of influenza, I had an impending sense of doom. Or at least a strange disquiet.

It was October and the flu season had passed, supposedly. I was on air, when the private number in the studio rang and Grant answered it. His voice was not normal as he replied to the person at the other end of the line. It was too measured, too calm and too serious.

My sister-in-law was nannying for us and had taken the call from my mother in Hamilton, telling her that Jeanette had been rushed to hospital in an ambulance. When Grant told me I knew immediately and definitely that she was going to die. I threw up in the studio rubbish bin.

Let me tell you about my only sibling, my older sister, and best friend.

Jeanette was a gifted child. Her IQ was off the spectrum. At 4-years-old she was drawing pictures that most teenagers doing NCEA art would fail to duplicate.

She had a photographic memory and was completely brilliant at everything. With this she had an aloof confidence, even as a child. I see it in my eldest son, Tom.

She was by far the brightest child at every school she attended. But her air of mystery and disinterest in popularity, along with an incredible quiet self assurance, meant she was never ever bullied.

Her younger sister (that would be me) on the other hand was of above average intelligence, fat, funny and desperate to be popular.

Being bullied beyond comprehension was only just avoided by the "funny" attribute.

Jeanette was a savant. She also became incredibly bored with everyday things and everyday education. So at the age of 10 she decided to make her life different. She created a life set in 1875.

For a year she addressed Mum and Dad as Mama and Papa, wore Victorian clothes, used a chamber pot, and drew all her pictures as though life was in fact a hundred years earlier.

It was trippy for Mum and Dad. She grew out of it. At 11 she briefly became Catholic. Then a Spanish artist at 12.

My sister was a brilliant artist too, who sold her work when we were in college together in the US, to constantly get my sorry ass out of debt. She would pay off my dental bills, and my rent. She was everything I wasn't.



Please don't believe the flu only kills old and vulnerable people. My sister was in her prime. Photo / Supplied

She was beautiful and incredibly good with money. She was also a professional Tahitian dancer, a national medal-winning power lifter, a scientist and a gym freak.

Jeanette never smoked, hardly ever drank, walked everywhere, beat me every single time we played Trivial Pursuit, and when she'd finished her fine arts degrees, became a scientist. I loved my sister more than anyone else on earth.

In October 2000 my sister died of influenza in Waikato hospital.

 She got sick on the Tuesday and was dead on the Saturday. It was a horrible death. I'll never forget sitting with her all through the night. She was in an induced coma. Blood seeped from her eyes, nose and ears. Her hands and feet turned black.

The wonderful staff at the hospital hooked her up to a machine that removed her blood, cleaned it, and pumped it back through her body. The noise of that machine will live in my head forever.

"If she lives, and she probably won't," the doctor said, "I'm afraid she will lose her hands and feet."

"I don't care!" I said. "Please just save her."

How could an artist, scientist, and Les Mills fitness fanatic live without hands and feet? I didn't care about her. I just wanted Jeanette alive for "me". The problem was because she was so young and fit, her body was battling the infection so hard that it killed itself in the struggle.

Please don't believe the flu only kills old and vulnerable people. My sister was in her prime. She was healthy, fit and lean.

Don't tell me you have the flu when you have a cold. Don't tell me you don't need the flu injection. Don't tell me you know anything about the flu until you've seen someone die of it, in a matter of days.

Don't even talk to me about the flu until you've watched a body shut down, bleed from every orifice, and then die with lungs full of fluid. There was no combination of antibiotics strong enough to save the life of a near perfect human being.

Get the flu shot. Don't write to me telling me about bad reactions. Don't begin to talk to me about not believing in vaccinations, because I really might hurt you. And I'll certainly hate you. I've seen the result of not getting a flu vaccination. Jeanette told me she didn't think she needed one because she was fit and healthy.

Influenza kills young, amazing, gifted, beautiful, incredible people. It's quick, and it's brutal, and extraordinarily messy. Please get vaccinated.

– nzherald.co.nz

By [Polly Gillespie](#) @pollygillespie

Labrador (Auckland Central) | 08:47AM Monday, 02 May 2016

Get your flu jab. No ifs or buts. This week.

Suzanne Bailey () | 08:48AM Monday, 02 May 2016

I watched my daughter die from Cancer and it was heart wrenching and just plain awful but wasn't as horrific as your sister's Death Polly. OK u win, for the first time I really understand and for the first time will get the flu vaccination.

JM (Northland) | 08:49AM Monday, 02 May 2016

that would have been tough to write

well done I and no doubt many, many others admire your courage

you are totally correct about vaccinations and complainers

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