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Karen Langhart sends nearly 40 packages to friends before taking her own life

After her daughter died from a controversial contraceptive, former Durango resident worked as an advocate for educating women about their reproductive health

By Ann Butler

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Herald staff writer and Shane Benjamin

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City editor

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In the days following her death, it became apparent that former Durango resident Karen Langhart took her own life after much contemplation and with hope of raising awareness about efforts to improve women's lives.

Langhart, 56, sent nearly 40 packages to friends, including many in Durango, shortly before her death Thursday. The packages contained mementos, personal messages and literature about efforts underway to educate and inform young women about reproductive health.

She was the mother of Erika Langhart, who grew up in Durango and died at age 24 of a double pulmonary embolism in 2011 while using NuvaRing, a contraceptive. Langhart and her husband, Rick, lived in Durango for more than 25 years before moving to the Phoenix area. They founded and owned the Red Snapper, a Durango seafood restaurant, for about 20 years.

The letters strike a haunting and sorrowful tone from someone resolute to take her own life.

"By the time you receive this note I will have joined Erika," one letter reads. "I consider it an honor to give my life, as so many others have since the dawn of time, to help save the lives of others."

One such package was sent to Park Elementary School teacher Beth Brunso, who worked at the Red Snapper and tutored Langhart's son, Kyle. Brunso's husband, Sven Brunso, also worked at the Red Snapper from 1993 to 2003, starting as a waiter and becoming restaurant manager.

"I've gone through so many emotions," Beth Brunso said Monday. "There's got to be other people who are receiving stuff like this. I think in her mind, she's hoping it will bring more attention to this cause."

Langhart's foundation, Informed Choice For Amerika, raises money for research and education about women's health, particularly the dangers of hormones like desogestrol in NuvaRing, a progestin that has been linked to blood clotting. She worked 16 hours a day, seven days a week for the foundation, Rick Langhart said during a phone interview this week. "She was so busy for four years," he said. "I just kind of realized my position and supported her the best I could."

Rick Langhart said he and Kyle spoke with Karen on Thursday morning. She asked them to continue the fight to inform women of dangerous contraceptives and hold pharmaceutical companies responsible. He didn't offer details of her death or say whether he knew of her plans.

"We both got to visit with her," he said. "She kept emphasizing over and over, 'You've got to get on this. Every day counts. Women, they're dying. You have to get this done, and you have to do it as soon as you can.'"

The Yuma Police Department confirmed that Karen Langhart died Thursday from an apparent suicide in a hotel.

Karen Langhart was frustrated by the "walls" she encountered dealing with Congress and the pharmaceutical companies, her husband said.

Karen and Rick Langhart led a legal and public-relations battle against Merck & Co., the pharmaceutical company that makes NuvaRing, which they attribute as the cause of Erika's death. They were part of a class-action lawsuit against Merck but rejected being a party to a \$100-million settlement. Instead, they pursued a separate case that was dismissed Sept. 10 in a San Francisco court.

"All Karen wanted was these people to be held accountable," Rick Langhart said. "It was never about the money, we just wanted a court date where we could stand in front of representatives of Merck and tell them what they had done to us and what they're still doing to young women. That was a pretty dark time."

Rick Langhart said he doesn't expect to win the war against major pharmaceutical companies that produce dangerous contraceptives, but he hopes to make a difference.

"It's a David and Goliath thing," he said. "I don't think you ever win something like this. ... They've got billions of dollars to spend on attorneys every year, which they do. They pick off these organizations one by one."

Rick Langhart said Karen left a number of instructions, including that she didn't want any services. But if people want to get together to do a fundraiser in honor of Erika's foundation, "that would be great."

"This was never about Karen, it was about Erika," he said. "It's just going to be a heavy heart for a while."

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[Watch a video from Karen Langhart's dedication speech about Natural Love Stories](#)

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