

The Last Adventure

Three Brothers take on the Minnesota Legislature

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

THE VIDEO ON JULY 15, 2017 was clear: the driver of the light rail train ran a red light at a busy St. Paul intersection. The train plowed into the driver's side of a car crossing the intersection. Fate placed Nic Westlake in the driver's seat and his fiancée and dance partner, Neli Petkova, in the passenger seat.

Nic and his younger brother, Seth, had just left a dinner meeting with dance friends hosted by their ballroom dance coach Nels Petersen. Seth got the call. He was met at the hospital by Nels and the hospital chaplain. "I had to confront the surgeons," recalled Seth. "There was no signal coming from Nic's brain to prove consciousness. They tried experimental techniques, but no reaction. I felt very cold all of a sudden."

Pete, Nic's older brother, got the call in Ohio. "I got up early the next morning and took the longest car ride of my life back to Minneapolis, which is a pretty good haul from Ohio. I fortunately had a little time to be around a piece of Nic even though his mind wasn't the same." Their South Dakota parents, Lisa and Bob Westlake, were at a wedding in Missouri, and got in the car the next morning. Recalled Seth, "they were planning to meet Nic and me the next day in Minneapolis. They still ended up there, but for the worst reasons."

The family made tough decisions together about organ donations and end of life. Sadly, Nic passed two days after the crash. Thankfully, Neli survived, but she suffered severe injuries

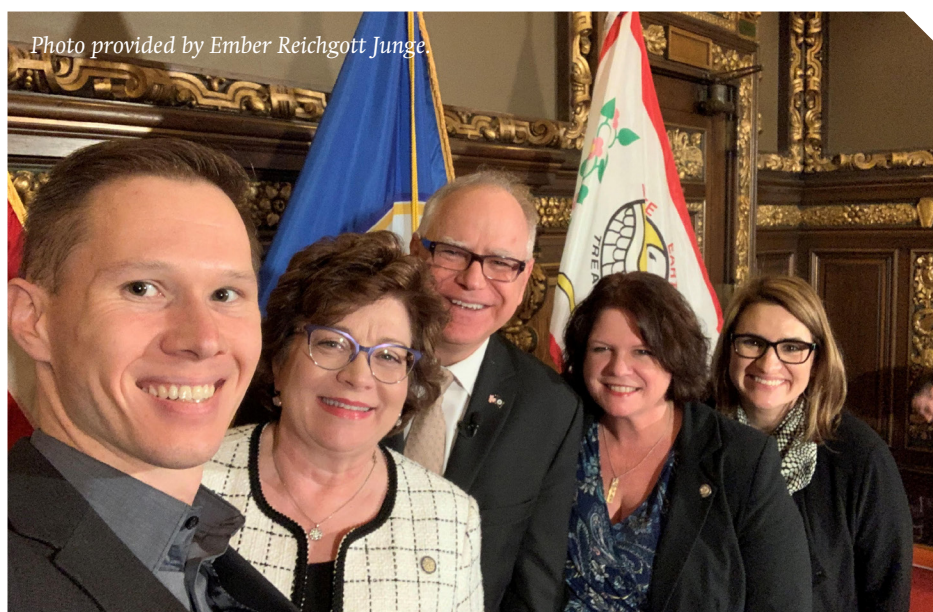
and trauma. The light rail driver was suspended for three days and returned to his job. "We were just so frustrated, as we better understood what happened," recounted Pete. "The driver suffered basically no consequences."

So began the family's quest to "chase" legislation at the Minnesota capitol. Authorities said the driver's actions did not rise to gross negligence. Investigations confirmed, however, that the driver caused the crash by careless driving and running a red light. So why no consequences for this driver? Because light rail drivers were *exempt* from the Minnesota traffic code. Had a bus driver run that red light, they would have been charged with a misdemeanor.

Changing Minnesota law seemed a natural legacy for Nic. "Nic was really enthusiastic about politics," recalled Pete. "He was definitely eyeing

opportunities to get into the political world. We also come from a political family." Their maternal grandfather, Rolland "Rollie" Redlin, was a leader in the North Dakota Senate for over 30 years and served a term in the U.S. Congress. "I'm sure our grandpa was watching down on us, and maybe he was joined by Nic," he added.

"When this opportunity came up (in January of 2019), it was for me one more adventure with Nic. It was a chance to have this experience with him; something he would be good at. He would have enjoyed being there with us. If it had been one of us, Nic would have been shoulder to shoulder with us leading the charge to make that change." Added Seth, "It didn't feel like we were doing it because we were angry that we lost Nic, though that was part of the motivation. We didn't want Nic's death to mean nothing. We wanted to cause



change that would help other people. It was a good part of the healing, to be able to accomplish something like that in his loss.”

Pete thought back to when he and Nic were in the same psychology class in high school. They partnered for a class project, putting it off until the night before it was due. They had to show “learning.” So they decided to teach their cat to follow a string and take photos of it. They whipped up the formulas, wrote the paper, and “killed it.” Recalled Pete, “we needed to have a message. How do we communicate the message the teacher wants to hear? That is the memory that comes back when I think about the capitol experience. We wanted a clear goal and clear message for a very positive thing we are trying to do. Nic would have loved being in that.”

While the message might be clear, nothing at the legislature is easy. “Thinking back on it, I was blown away by how hard it can be to get something simple done in the legislature,” said Pete. “We put a huge amount of effort into it, getting an obvious thing fixed. It was amazing how much energy that took. On the flip side, I know we had

pretty good success and a huge amount of luck comes with that. We were fortunate that it felt easy.”

Easy? The brothers made no less than seven trips to the capitol to testify before committees, watch floor debates and attend the bill signing. Pete flew in for each session from his New York home. Their success didn’t happen by accident. With guidance from Nels, the brothers created a team that believed in them, including lawyer/lobbyist Patrick Hynes and bipartisan bill authors Sen. Carla Nelson (R-Rochester) and Rep. Cheryl Youakim (DFL-St. Louis Park). Nels invited me to join the team during the January Snow Ball Dance Competition. As a former Minnesota state Senator, I was honored to volunteer; I felt I represented the support and love of the entire ballroom dance community.

The legislature can be intimidating for testifiers, especially in Senate hearing rooms. As Pete described it, “most of the time you are sitting in the middle of a big round firing squad of questioners.” Added Seth, “the grandeur of the round table and (Senators) sitting above you looking down was a very different feel from the House.” But

the brothers were fearless. Said Pete: “For me it was a big adventure. It was something we needed to do, like cracking open a new video game. A new set of challenges to solve problems. We might not be successful, but that never stopped me from playing a video game. You can think of it like dance, too. I know that in competitions, I may not be the best. It’s great if I am, but that’s not going to stop me from getting out on the floor. You can’t be afraid to get on the floor.”

Their loving bond and fierce commitment as brothers were not lost on legislators. “I’m the mother of three sons myself,” Sen. Carla Nelson told me. “I’m reminded of Scripture, ‘A three-fold cord is not easily broken.’ I often thought that about my sons, and I saw that with the Westlake brothers. They honored Nic every step of the way. After our first hearing, we needed to take a selfie because Nic would always take a selfie. As if Nic was there.”

She continued, “What I really appreciated was in their time of grief, they were able to turn that grief into action. They did so very thoughtfully. Their ballroom dance training prepared them for poise and grace during strenuous times. And tenacity. You want to work with people like that on every bill. They were in such pain, yet they were able to work through that in a positive way. They channeled it for good.”

The Senate process went smoothly; after two committee hearings, the bill passed the Senate unanimously. Sen. Nelson acknowledged the Westlake family sitting in the Senate balcony: the brothers, their parents, and their 92-year old grandma, wife of the former North Dakota Congressman. I was proud to sit at their side along with Nels and Patrick.

House author Rep. Cheryl Youakim also found the brothers to be amazing messengers. But despite their heartfelt



Peter Westlake, Ember Reichgott Junge, and Seth Westlake.

Photo provided by Ember Reichgott Junge.

committee testimony, the House road was rocky. Legislator opponents of light rail persistently tried to broaden the bill with partisan amendments. Rep. Youakim showed extraordinary discipline in keeping to her message and fighting off amendments. “This is a narrow bill that the family brought to us to correct a problem that greatly impacted their lives and that will help others. Let’s keep it clean, send it to the governor, so the family can have closure.”

Amid the chaos, a highly unusual clerical error caused a defeated amendment to be included in Rep. Youakim’s bill. She was forced to debate opponents in the next committee for an hour simply to remove the erroneous amendment! That was the warm-up for the one-hour battle in the House of Representatives, where eight Republican lawmakers rose to support amendments for other purposes. “I was emotionally frustrated,” recalled Rep. Youakim. “It should have been a simple fix, but they were playing games with it. That was the first bill I had gotten so personally invested in and emotional.” In the end, all but one House member voted for the bill. Easy? Welcome to politics.

None of this was lost on the brothers. “Both authors were amazing to work with; both were incredible speakers for our case,” recalled Seth. “To see Rep. Youakim confront resistance from her fellow House members in a professional and no nonsense way, that was so good to hear. Sometimes it felt like, ‘How can you oppose a change like this?’ It felt good to have competent people on our side.” Pete agreed. “We could always tell they were fighting for us. I think both adapted to their environments. Cheryl had that vibe of the House; she was scrappier, ready to jump in, bob and weave a bit; you could see more rough and tumble in the

House. Carla was the picturesque and precise Senator. They were perfect fits to present their bills in their environments. It was fun to see them work.”

The long road led to a private bill signing with Governor Tim Walz. Unfortunately, only Pete could attend from the east, because a winter storm from the west prevented his parents from traveling, as well as Seth, who was returning from a dance competition. So the governor dialed up their parents on speaker phone during the signing. Both bill authors and the Lieutenant Governor attended. While it was a warm and exciting moment for Pete, it was “strange” to celebrate this big victory lap by himself. He had traveled so much of this road with Seth, his parents, and Nic in spirit. “I was more lonely than I expected, especially the time thinking about Nic.” They took a selfie, this time while Pete held a photo of Nic in the *Sheer Dance* magazine. Framed photos were sent to the bill authors with appreciation.

So how could the brothers channel their pain in such a constructive way? “We wanted to cause change in memory of not having Nic, so we did have to live

through that pain. But this was our way of making meaning out of Nic’s death and to honor the brother we lost,” said Seth. For Pete, “I honestly felt less sad doing it, because I felt so much like Nic was there, especially when we would think about what to say. It was like that story in high school where we had to figure out a class project together. For me it wasn’t so sad, because it was a cool way to spend more time with Nic. It was almost sad to have it over.”

In the end, brothers will always be brothers. Pete and Seth would play video games at Seth’s apartment late into the night after a successful day at the capitol. “Despite all the important stuff we had to do, we are always going to fit in that time to be brothers,” said Seth. Added Pete, “We had a project to work on and I could connect with Seth like I connected with Nic on that psychology project. And we could play video games. It was a good excuse to make some time for that.” I suspect Nic and Grandpa Rollie were looking down with great pride, maybe playing their own video games, and loving it. **E**



Photo by the Minnesota Ballroom Blast Photography Team.