

Eulogy for John Brindley

That passage from Corinthians has always had a profound effect on me at funerals. Its message is that, above everything else, love is what matters most. And really, that's why we're all here today: brought together by our different kinds of love for Dad. So, thank you for being here to share this time, to pay your respects, but also to celebrate the man he was.

When you're nursing someone with a terminal illness, life can become entirely focused on the immediate details: appointments, medication, pain and practicalities. We were so lucky to be able to care for him at home, which we couldn't have done, without the amazing support from Hospice at Home and Marie Curie nurses, and the 4 daily visits from the wonderful Harcombe Valley carers. Dad, Eileen and I were so very grateful to all of you.

Sadly the illness begins to obscure the real person behind it - their vibrancy, interests, experiences and achievements. I don't want the difficult final year to define Dad. I want us to look back at the other eighty-seven fantastic years: at a life that was full, active, accomplished and shared with so many of us.

After he retired, Dad wrote books about his work, music, sport and childhood, with the proceeds going to charity. They preserve the people and stories that mattered to him and have given me a wonderful way to hear his voice again. They also show how the main strands of his life - family, work, sport and singing - were constantly woven together.

Dad has always been very proud of his roots. Born in Stoke-on-Trent in 1937, he grew up in the latter part of the war with air raids, rationing, gas masks and nights beneath the kitchen table, but his memories are also full of village life and humour. Although an only child, he was surrounded by cousins, aunts, uncles and friends. His father, Harold, was a colliery worker and Methodist lay preacher; his mother, Eva, was a pottery decorator and Sunday-school teacher.

After his father preached one day on 'the vastness and spaciousness of the inner world', the young John was challenged over a third large helping of blackberry pudding. 'Well, you know what it is, Dad - it's the vastness and spaciousness of the inner world.' His father conceded, 'Well, at least you were listening to something I said.'

The Methodist chapel gave Dad his first musical inspiration. Aged about ten, he heard Mr Dulson's magnificent bass voice and decided that this was how a man was supposed to sing! He later joined the chapel choir and discovered Gilbert and Sullivan at Leek High School, beginning his lifelong love of singing and performing, joining different Amateur Operatic Societies as he moved round the country.

However, sport was never far from his thoughts. At Leek High School he became Colts and Junior Athletics Champion, played first-team hockey and represented Staffordshire Schoolboys. His junior football brought approaches from Port Vale, although cleaning boots while hoping to eventually play an actual game, did not appeal. In any case, his family were staunch Stoke City supporters, which may have had more to do with it!

Instead, hockey became the dominant sport. He joined Leek Hockey Club in 1954 and, in his first game, successfully managed to break his nose. Fortunately, he soon began breaking records instead. He progressed through county and divisional hockey, reached final international trials and played at England B level. And in the summer, he turned his attention to cricket, topping the North Staffordshire Cricket League batting averages. Even well into his Eighties, Dad could recall the score at any given hockey or cricket pitch he'd played on!

In 1955, at seventeen, Dad began work as a civil servant at Hanley County Court. The office was a formal place, but after receiving his first salary he arrived one morning wearing a white shirt with a sharply cut collar and a fashionable slim-jim tie. The Deputy Chief Clerk pointed at the tie and gasped, 'What the devil is that?' The Lord Chancellor's Department wasn't yet ready for such sartorial elegance.

His career was interrupted by National Service in the RAF from 1956 to 1958. Shortly after he joined, his father died, followed only weeks later by his grandmother. It was a painful beginning to adult life, but National Service also broadened his world through new friendships, more sport and an RAF skiffle group.

By his later teens, Saturday nights meant jiving at the Queen's Hall in Burslem, where Dad went with the Baddeley Green gang. The boys routinely asked a different girl to dance each week, but then Dad met Mum. She asked him about his hobbies and received the wonderfully concise answer, 'Sport, mainly', which obviously did the trick! Despite sporting a pair of fluorescent lime green socks when he was introduced to Mum's family and riding a motorbike, after 4 years together, they married in September 1960.

I arrived on the scene in 1968 and within 3 years he'd moved to Wolverhampton County Court and then on to the Midlands Circuit Office in Birmingham, which of course meant a change in hockey club!

In 1973, Dad moved to Headquarters in London and joined Slough Hockey Club. Once again, work opened a new sporting chapter. Slough were winning every title going and he went on to coach the first-team squad through its golden era, culminating in the 1980 European Club Championship victory in Barcelona.

Even at that level, Dad's sporting life retained its humour. During one match, an opposing player dislocated a finger and was directed towards him for help. Dad had no medical expertise, but felt obliged to do something, so he gave the finger a sharp tug and - to his amazement - clicked it back into place. The grateful player smiled at him for the rest of the match. Only afterwards did he discover that the Slough players had told the injured man Dad was an orthopaedic specialist. Once the truth emerged, the smile disappeared rather quickly.

In 1982, Dad became District Administrator for the courts of Devon, Cornwall and Somerset, bringing the family to Sidmouth and adding Otter Vale to his long list of hockey clubs. He returned professionally to London HQ in 1987 as an Assistant Secretary, and in 1993 became a Permanent Under Secretary, with responsibility for all the courts across London and South-East England, tribunals and interdepartmental work - a far cry from that sharp dressed 17 year old, who learned his craft from the bottom up.

The promotions and titles tell us how capable he was, but not why he commanded such respect. Dad championed his colleagues and staff. If he believed someone was capable of more, he would push them - not to undermine them, but because he had faith in them. He brought the same quality to hockey. He was intensely competitive and wanted to win, but he also encouraged and supported fellow players, especially in his coaching roles, helping them to fulfil their own potential.

In 1996, his public service was recognised when he was appointed a Companion of the Order of the Bath (a CB) in the Queen's Birthday Honours list. What a special moment that was, watching Dad receive his award from the Queen. He retired the following year, after a career of more than four decades that had begun with taking payments from debtors at Hanley County Court.

Retirement certainly didn't mean slowing down. It's clear that hockey had been his passion, as after he stopped playing, he said it felt as if his life had come to an end. But giving up work enabled him to fully focus on his singing; he took up singing lessons again and enjoyed choral work, as well as solo performances. He was prolific in his performances, being part of the Budleigh Salterton Male Voice Choir (whose members past and present are here today to pay their respects in song), Sidmouth Choral Society, The Songsters, Glowing Embers – to name but a few, as well as participating with different artists in numerous charity concerts. He also recorded some work here in the Methodist Church, so we are lucky enough to still have his voice to listen to...and you'll hear one of his pieces after my eulogy.

After a long period of illness, Mum passed away in April 2017, after 57 years together and obviously this was a very difficult time for Dad.

But it's funny what life has in store for us. Dad and Eileen met up again, almost fifty years after they had first worked in Wolverhampton County Court, with a thread of Christmas cards connecting the intervening years. Eileen soon became an important part of his final chapter and was beside him throughout his illness and at the end. Through their shared love of music, they were grateful to have experienced 8 happy years together – or as Eileen calls them, their bonus years.

It's difficult to do justice to a life as full as Dad's – it really is rare to come across someone who has excelled across such different spheres. But the titles, cups and honours are only part of the man.

Those who knew Dad will also remember the person behind his roles: the twinkle in his eyes, often appearing just before a dry observation; the cheeky smile; his enthusiasm and breadth of knowledge; his modesty and humility and, beneath his determination and competitiveness, his kindness and calmness. These are the qualities that earned him affection, as well as respect. Even towards the end of his life, he was charming all the visiting nurses with his warm smile and politeness!

Of course, I am immensely proud of everything that Dad has achieved from his humble beginnings. But to me, he was the man who would play Frisbee with me, who'd help me learn endless quotes for my exams, who'd pick me up from a nightclub at 2am, who told me when I left home at 18, that he would always be there for me, whatever happened. That unconditional love has sustained me for the last 40 years, giving me the safety net to go out into the world and live my life to the full. So, what an honour it has been to share the last years of Dad's life, with all of its ups and downs and to be with him at the very end.

Today, all the different parts of his life come together. And so do we. We remember him with admiration, with gratitude, with affection and, above all, with love.

Karen Brindley
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