

Suzanne Sutcliff: Commemorative Statement in respect of James Stephen Hulton

Date of Birth: 13 May 1977

Date of Death: 21 February 2020

My brother James was born on 13th May 1977, in Tameside General Hospital which is in Ashton under Lyne. He was healthy, bouncing and bubbly at 8lbs and 15 ounces. He also reached all of his average milestones and was as an inquisitive, happy child. When he died some 42 ½ years later, he was a cherished son, partner, daddy of 3, brother, brother in law, son in law, uncle and friend to many. In his memory, I can say a couple of words which came straight from him, that I recall from the many weeks where he discussed his imminent death with me. He pleaded with me to remember him *'not now but how I was'*. He told me:

'Please make sure M (partner) my kids and Mum and Dad all know how much I love them';

'Please keep being involved in the kids' lives' and;

'I have good friends and know that people do seem to like me'

I take comfort in carrying his legacy forward and knowing that he knew he was loved.

This is a difficult piece to write because my parents, sister in law and James' children are in too much pain to articulate memories and feelings. Our lives have been torn apart and there will forever be a before and after for each of us now. Every photograph, every life event, each video or Facebook time hop image goes in the pre or post 21st February 2020 of our brains.

I was James' eldest sister by 2 years and his only sibling. Later in life he liked to be known as Jim by everyone including me. Mum and Dad continued to call him James. As children we had a really happy childhood spending time with our parents and extended family – mainly our maternal grandparents with whom we were really close and spent a great deal of time. We would make tents from their laundry dryer, play dress up and walk for miles with our Grandad ^{(personal/sensi} who would split a giant bar of dairy milk between us when we reached our destination. We used to laugh as adults about the way he did this with his fingernail ensuring a completely equal split. I remember walks where Grandad would just venture across fields without footpaths and having angry golfers and farmers chasing us. As a family we did lots together and enjoyed annual family holidays to a cottage in Anglesey and on coach trips to Euro camp destinations. I remember each of these with great fondness. We made friends with other kids and felt so free camping in wood/beach type destinations.

James could be shy as a child but together we gave each other confidence. Mum and Dad still have his first photograph sitting on the plush velvet chair they used to drag round schools in the early eighties and nineties. He had such a close bond with his keyworker at nursery that he had the photograph taken sitting on her knee. He had a shock of shiny light red hair which my Mum keeps the locks cut in his first ever haircut in a special locket. When James reached primary school he became interested in chess and joined a club often participating at regional level. He also continued to excel at art and made new friends. He loved fishing with my Dad and due to my Dad's trade as a cabinet maker, James learnt loads of skills around carpentry and other areas. We moved when he was 10 to a really rural area and he caught, prepared and cooked the fish for us to eat. Mum and Dad remember how proud he and in turn they was/were. When he became older there wasn't anything he couldn't really put his hand to even though IT became his chosen career path. He even once built a PC for his eldest son from bits of an IT equipment he found in a skip.

When he was ten he received his first commodore computer with savings from Dad having stopped smoking. He was elated and became really excited about beginning computer programming which he was great at and really excelled.

James continued to make friends in senior school and was popular and adventurous. He had an active social life and we were really close. As a big sister I suppose I always felt a bit maternal in some ways, I defended and protected him and helped him with Mum and Dad when his behaviour was typically 'teenagerish'. We both loved rap music and RnB. He was so handy and on one occasion he completely refurbished his room building a sofa from scratch, which he upholstered and made fish tanks with neon tetra fish and lights in the arms.

As a teenager, he loved cars and I vividly remember him and Dad taking his Vauxhall Nova to pieces on the driveway literally taking the engine out and putting a new one in. He was always able to do that stuff with help and mentoring from Dad. They were really close and he soaked up the knowledge Dad shared. People around us couldn't believe what he could achieve. Later he sold some art and drew a picture upon request of a family friend's mill, which was hung in pride of place in the centre of the place.

At around 17 years of age, Jim experienced sudden onset anxiety and there were times when this was really debilitating and I was really worried for him. We spent loads of time together and I sourced some counselling and we got through it together, just by talking and talking and providing reassurance constantly. That didn't work in the time leading up to his death. At that time in early 2020, we could all get through to him but by the time he would go to sleep and wake up, his symptoms were back with an absolute vengeance. He had no peace.

James met the mother of his daughter through friends who were at the same university as she was and they lived together for a while. [personal/sensitive] . When

he was 25, they found she was pregnant and his daughter, my beautiful niece was born in October 2001. After a short separation they decided to make a go of things in [personal/sensitive]

Essex to be close to her family. They reconciled and moved down there together. When they split up again the following year, James made the decision to stay down there to enable him to have joint custody and co-parent his young daughter. This remained the case until he died and is something I am very proud of him for doing. Mum and Dad were concerned that he was to become a young father but were so proud of him for stepping up to the mark and excelling as a brilliant father which continued with his two sons. He and his daughter remained extremely close right up to the date of his death and enjoyed time out together. They bonded over music nights and nights out with long island ice teas. Their relationship evolved like that as she grew. She is also incredibly creative and artistic just like him and they both absolutely love/loved music which was an interest they shared together. She comments now about his uptake of random habits such as war hammer figure painting and building fish tanks from scratch. She recalls him putting objects on the kitchen table to draw with him watching her and one day deciding to buy multiple campervan build magazines which was to be his latest project.

As he got older Mum and Dad were always impressed by his massive skill set. He was a self-taught plasterer, plastering my home and Mum and Dad's huge garden chalet. They remember how much he helped them on visits to their home in Wales, designing and building their garden, helping Dad with mechanics and bringing them plants he had sourced. Mum's favorite is an acer tree which began life as a twig and continues to flourish in their beautiful garden. My Dad bought a small boat and James enjoyed being out on the Conwy estuary with him. In his younger years he worked as a TV salesman, graphic design sign writer and later in Revenue and Benefits Teams [personal/sensitive]. He sold clothes for a while too and definitely had some entrepreneurial tendencies.

In 2009, James met his life partner when they worked together [personal/sensitive]. They later formed a relationship and moved in together. They had their first son in 2011 and their second in 2015. They enjoyed a wonderfully happy family life together. Jim continued to share his creativity with his sons creating board games which they still have, teaching them to ride bikes, rejoicing in their progress and their reaching milestones. He began condensed hours to become more involved in childcare and continued to have shared care of his daughter, ensuring that all of the siblings grew up with close bonds spending quality time together. He enjoyed gaming, creating, building, weight training and kayaking.

James and his partner moved to a property with a large garden and he was able to build a large log cabin in the garden from double glazed windows that could not be used and which were given to him by a business and with timber he bought. He then built a home gym inside there. He and his life partner enjoyed a huge circle of friends and regularly socialised enjoying great relationships together. Within their relationship I saw so much fun and love for each other, they were of course different people but I think they just clicked from the time they met. They enjoyed family holidays although James' fear of flying was a little restrictive. I loved their relationship and was often quite envious of it when in earlier relationships myself. They enjoyed barbeques and nights out with friends and bike rides with the boys. His partner has an extensive family and James was invited in with open arms. They were all incredibly close and there are lots of photographs of them together. I have stayed in touch with them because in addition to being the family of my sister in law who I love very much, they were a massive part of my brother's world in both sickness and in health and I am forever grateful for that. My brother's partner's brother began kayaking with him and they really loved each other's company. They spent special days together and holidayed to Italy when his partner's brother got married there. There were so many happy days that he talked about to me and they shared photographs of. His partner's Mum played a massive role in his life particularly when he was so ill.

James illness meant that his partner became his full time carer, which tore her life and that of her boys/my nephews apart. My eldest nephew spent part of his birthday week visiting his dad in hospital. His partner couldn't leave James alone, without organising someone to take care of him. She remains completely traumatised by his illness, his death and all of the circumstances surrounding this. From October until the date of his death, caring for James in his illness was her full time role including round the clock conversations about taking his own life which only increased towards his inpatient stay. The level and intensity of care took an immeasurable toll upon her. I can only describe what I saw as physical and mental agony.

James journeyed up to my parents' house with a close friend to use this as a base to explore Snowdown. We regularly look at the photographs as a family of him hiking and a video of him diving and swimming with a dog. They are precious snapshots of a life cut tragically and avoidably short. Sometimes I can watch them and others I can't. Sometimes they just feel like a memory of a memory and others the pain cuts too deep to endure. I finally understand what gut wrenching pain really is.

On the last birthday of my Mum's before she died, James travelled up to see her and took her for afternoon tea as a surprise. When they were tucking into sandwiches he said that he hadn't bought Mum a card because he thought that the best thing he could get for her was to be to

spend time together. This touched my Mum enormously and she is emotional now remembering it. Nothing can ever prepare you for burying your own son particularly in such extreme circumstances after such a short illness. They will never get over it.

Our last family holiday was a coach trip to Wales in June 2019 where James' family, mine and Mum and Dad enjoyed a fantastic time together. The kids played and played and he and his partner made loads of new friends and socialised. When I look back at pictures now it's almost impossible to believe that less than 8 months later he was dead.



My brother was my best friend and confidante. We always talked about how similar our psyches were and how well we understood each other's minds. Throughout his adult life until it was cut so desperately short, I continued to feel like I wanted to protect him and put anything I could right for him in any situation. Other than his partner, I feel like me and Mum were the first people he reached out to when he was troubled or anxious or just struggling with general life stuff.

I feel envious now of others around me with siblings particularly when they are not close. Jim was my only sibling and I loved him to the ends of the earth. When he became ill in the October before he died, I drove down late at night to bring him to my home in the north west to nurture and care for him and to access emergency support at A and E. I knew he was experiencing intrusive thoughts, pure OCD symptoms and really heightened anxiety which worsened significantly in the morning. In the end he didn't sleep, dropped massively in weight and didn't care about anything, including his appearance. I slept top to tail with him in bed and he would wake having night terrors and need to be talked down. It was frightening and traumatic and his partner had this for weeks and weeks. His emotions were so dampened and his thoughts so terrifying that what began as intrusive thoughts about suicide became his real time fixation but no one would listen to me. The reason I have never felt angry about him taking his own life is that in my lifetime, no trauma that I have experienced including losing my brother has been more terrifying, intolerable and agonizing than the pain I myself experienced with similar health conditions in my early twenties. I survived and he didn't.

In his final days in the hospital he experienced so much trauma that it was hard to hear ^[personal]

I spent hours on the phone with my sister in law throughout this time, nothing seemed to be happening, no real treatment, it was impossible to get through on the telephone and we couldn't be entirely convinced regarding his medication. I will always remember my Mum sending him the song *'I can see clearly now the rain has gone'* and he messaged her to say he had gone to sleep to that. I find that heartbreaking.

The day he died I was travelling down to visit with my husband and 2 children then aged 7 and 9. On the way down my brother's partner rang to say that someone had jumped from ^[personal/sensitive]

a bridge close to their home. I was driving and my husband had the phone and we both reassured her that James was safe in hospital. She commented that she had never heard of anyone jumping from there and she was worried because we knew he had considered taking his life at this location. Soon, the traffic began to back up and it took 4 hours to get through it. At the time I remember winding down my window in a queue and someone telling me the main road through Essex had been closed because someone had jumped. I recall appeasing the kids and commenting to my husband that this was even more reason for us to be grateful that my brother was an inpatient and how awful it would be for the deceased's family.

We arrived at my Jim's home address at 6.30pm and I rang him to say we were nearly there and would dump our stuff, before running straight back out to drive to see him. It obviously went to answerphone. I didn't know that he had already died 4 hours ago. Upon arrival at his house, his partner again expressed concern and we ran upstairs together eventually reaching the ward after ages on hold and different calls. Just as they told us they discharged him at 1.30pm, the police car pulled up outside. I ran out and asked if my brother was dead. His partner was screaming hysterically and my husband was holding her. He was great friends with my brother and took his death really hard after spending a lot of time on calls during his illness. He took all the kids upstairs. The police wanted clothing for a DNA ID check but his partner was literally on her knees. I will never forget her screams and I will never forget the scream of my eldest nephew as his Mum told him, when all of her family arrived, that his Daddy had died and would never come home. His youngest son was too little to even process this – how do you comprehend that your Daddy who you saw just a day ago has gone forever.

I can't even remember ringing my Mum and Dad to tell them, but apparently I told my Mum who was in a state of collapse, having spoken to him just hours earlier. She thought I was calling from the hospital with an update. My Dad took the phone from her. I vividly recall telling my niece who was away and arrived at the house shortly thereafter completely broken. I then rang his best mate and everyone else. It was hideous. I couldn't even cry. When I went back into the house, his partner was vomiting, it was like a physical outpouring of grief and agony and this carried on for hours and hours. My Mum and Dad travelled down the next day, their pain unimaginable, the whole situation was agonizing and uncontrollable, I felt so powerless. I will never forget us all huddled in James and his partners' bedroom being given information by the police and my Mum's teeth audibly and uncontrollably chattering together. His books and trainers were next to the bed.

Speaking from my own perspective I will never ever get over this despite counselling, medication and a strong support network. The pain is acute. Even though it softens from the very initial weeks, it worsens in other ways because at least when it is raw, I can think that I only saw him a couple of weeks ago. Now it has been 4 and a half years since I saw or spoke to my beloved brother that is painful in itself. Survival mode means that you have to block, block, and block or you could never carry on. My bedroom is like a shrine in some ways. I have his cap on my bedhead with a feather bauble with his name on, pictures of him as a child and with my kids and his, a candle that I light with a glass rainbow. This is how I try to think of the bridge where his life ended, like he was caught on his way down in some spiritual way maybe by my Grandad with whom he was so close. The alternative that we have had to endure of the way he died and the graphic description of what that looked like, will never ever leave me. The only way to deal with it is to block it out. It's like I can see it even though I didn't and for a while I became fixated on seeing the police officer's bodycam footage. I have stopped myself from pursuing this but it was an agonizingly strange feeling to have shared his every waking thought to then be cut out of the way his life ended, it was like I wanted to share in that to be with him.

I regularly have this vision that pops into my head of [personal/sensitive]

me running towards him getting him into some type of bear hug. I know that his partner has watched CCTV and how agonising that was. We still have so many unanswered questions which fuels trauma and grief.

At his funeral hundreds of people came. Coaches were organised. The eulogy was funny because he was. I couldn't cry, it was the beginning of my journey to hold everything together like I had promised him. His work colleagues went out to toast him shortly after his death and told me:

'Last night was nice, a lot of people came from all the teams Jim had worked in there was a lot of love for him and kindness. We did get comfort, so many people have a gap in their life left by him and they want to remember him as the cheeky chap he was and how he always had kind words for them when they needed it.'

Personally as James's sister I won't ever get his words out of my head or his legacy and my part in that. His kids lost their Dad when they were just 4, 9 and 18, his partner 34 and my parents lost their son before them. We will never properly heal. He had so much more to do, to achieve and to live for. I can still hear his booming northern accent when we met up 'Alright Sue' and giving me a big bear hug. Sometimes I just say over and over in my head 'we will meet again' because I can't ever accept that we won't and I'm not sure what I believe.