

## Kay's Funeral Tribute

A life seen by flashes of lightning.

Kay was born in Chester on September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1945 and was given the names Catherine Mary by her parents, Barbara and Graham Ross. Barbara was in the WAAF, an ambulance driver, and Graham in the RAF, a bomber pilot. They had been married at Cranwell. After the marriage failed, Barbara married Victor Jones; Kay's half-brother, Michael, is their son. Victor adopted Kay and she took his surname.

The family home was in Prenton, on the outskirts of Birkenhead, where Kay attended Pershore House Preparatory School. My own school, Prenton Preparatory School, was about a quarter of a mile away and the pupils of the two schools were sworn enemies. But Kay and I did not meet then - except, as we later worked out, to attend the same birthday parties.

At 13 Kay went as a boarder at Wycombe Abbey School in Buckinghamshire where she received an excellent, though somewhat old-fashioned, education and formed some lasting friendships, though she was never happy there and found it suffocating. She was wryly amused to find that certain books which were removed from her suitcase and confiscated in 1960 were on the school's reading lists ten years later.

Kay spent an idyllic time in Rome during her Gap year and went on to read Philosophy in the School of European Studies at the then-youthful University of Sussex, nicknamed Oxbridge by the Sea. It was Kay's kind of place, and she made the most of it, participating in structured and spontaneous philosophical debates and ethical arguments, joining and forming societies, playing the guitar, directing and attending plays, and engaging in left-wing political activities that would have scandalised her old housemistress. At this time too she honed her cooking skills and showed what a remarkable host she was destined to become. Her friendships in Sussex included members of faculty and fellow students, but also some of the most distinguished artists, novelists, poets, publishers and actors of the time.

Kay's degree course required her to spend a year at another European university. Her placement was at Aix-en-Provence, where she picked up enough French to continue many of her customary pursuits, and was received into the Catholic Church, adding two new Christian names - Antonia and Clare.

On her return to Sussex, she acquired her first of a succession of border collie puppies, Beowulf. At this time too she was selected as one of two UK delegates to a 'Young Europeans' Conference in France; the French press waxed lyrical, reporting that she spoke '*avec chaleur et passion*'.

For a few years Kay experimented with teaching, but her final choice of career surprised no one. Her Head of Chambers, John Critchley, sums it up:

'Kay was called to the Bar by Gray's Inn in 1974 and was a founder member of what is now known as Field Court Chambers. She practiced in the same set of Chambers from her Pupillage to her retirement at the end of March 2019, a period of 45 years. She was one of- if not the longest-serving

member of Chambers. It was a particular sadness for Chambers that Kay's fall and last illness occurred the week before a huge party was scheduled to take place, to celebrate her long and distinguished career. It was to have been attended by her friends in Chambers, her many other professional colleagues from around the Bar and a large collection of her clients, solicitors and other connections in the legal world. Unfortunately she did not survive to witness in tangible form the high esteem in which she was held by these disparate groups.

'Her professional life was spent entirely in cases concerning the underprivileged and most vulnerable members of society. She specialised in complex Family Law litigation, safeguarding the rights of children and families, especially sensitive cases concerning parents and children and cases with an international element. She was also an Associate Member of the American Bar Association. She was a terrifically loyal member both of Chambers and of Gray's Inn. She was fond of the customs of the Inn and the collegiate nature of the Bar and she showed this by her generosity of spirit to more junior members, whose careers she encouraged. Kay will be greatly missed by us all.'

Kay moved home around London in the early stages of her career, but in 1980 settled permanently in Cricklewood, filling her house and garden with things she knew to be useful or believed to be beautiful. She forged close friendships with many of her neighbours. One of her local community wrote to me:

'Kay was a kindred spirit, inspiration and mentor to many, young and old. Her kindness and altruistic nature were second to none and her wisdom and understanding on so many different levels beyond reckoning. She was a remarkable, funny and witty woman, and will be missed by many.'

When I asked the writer if I might use her name today, this was her answer:

'I spoke to a number of people who knew Kay, and we all had stories to tell about how she'd given us great guidance and been such a calming force amongst many a storm. Everybody loved her fast wit and her strength of character. She was a beautiful person all round, which is such a rare thing. So really it's a reflection of many. We were all proud to know her and loved her.'

'A mentor to young and old.' Among those young were our daughter Imogen - Kay's god daughter - and our son Alex, and also another family of siblings; Gabrielle sent me these words on behalf of herself and her brothers, Nicholas and Joel:

'You were one of a kind. I still remember your tight cuddles when you consoled us through childhood. The firm but friendly advice you gave us as teenagers and your echoes of pride as we grew into adults. We always wanted to make you proud. You grew up in a challenging environment. You are a hero.'

'Auntie Kay, you were the family we chose. You took that title and made it your own. Thank you for your strength, your compassion, and your love. You helped shape all of our lives, and for that, we are forever grateful. I know in my heart that your love will live on through us all.'

‘You grew up in a challenging environment.’ How could that apply to Kay? Those who knew her best will instantly understand. Kay knew lasting mental pain. For one thing, she could never find her father. Now we understand a child’s need to know her parents, but things were different fifty or sixty years ago, and her mother strongly condemned Kay’s efforts to trace Graham Ross. Growing up, at home and at school, Kay felt like an outsider, having little in common with those around her. When I met her in 1964, her self-esteem was just beginning to rise up from rock-bottom, after her first term at university, but it remained shaky and regularly plummeted. Nothing, except her work, could convince her that her life was worthwhile. But from her own pain she reached out to others who were weak, or abused, or excluded, or undervalued.

A colleague who became a friend wrote:

‘Kay, you were my mentor and a deeply-loved personal friend for 35 years - still too short a time. You mentored and befriended my children, who called you their ‘wise old owl’, and listened to you far more than to their parents! We enjoyed many shared holidays and often laughed until we cried. One of your favourite memories was of a family safari, and of the coast of Kenya. Kay, you were a force of nature! Generous, too, and compassionate. You helped so many people.’

And there was a postscript I wasn’t supposed to use -

‘I missed out the bits about her “take-your-life-in-your-hands” driving and sailing’.

Oh, yes, those boats, Narwahl and Narwahl II, their names defiantly mis-spelled!

It was while I sat beside Kay shortly before she died that I received an email from a former pupil, now as it happens a solicitor, who was taught in her teens by Kay in the 1960s. It arrived just in time for me to read it to Kay, speaking close to her ear as she lay in the hospital bed:

‘There has never been a time when I haven’t appreciated and valued what you gave me. It would be fair to say that you provided me with a sense of identity, that I was not a waste of air; very powerful, given the world I came from.’

And then to me she added:

‘if it would mean anything to her to know that she helped me, gave me a solid platform, on which I have tried to build, changed my life, I would like her to know.’

My hope, my prayer, for Kay is that she knows, now without fear or doubt, that while she was apt to see only what she perceived as her weakness, or her failure, the truth is that by what she did and by what she was, she helped to reveal the power of love in this broken world.

Kay was on the organ donor register. We know few details, but we do know that her gifts were life-saving and life-enhancing. At the end she was moved to a small room next to an operating theatre, and two medical teams stood in somewhat baffled silence as I read to Kay from some of the works we’d discussed, and loved, and argued about over the decades: John Donne, George Herbert, Shakespeare of course, T.S. Eliot, Dante, du Bellay, Leopardi - the Bible.

I read Psalm 23, in the version we heard today, and the beginning of Chapter 14 of St John's Gospel, ending with the words, 'I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know him, and have seen him.'

Only after I finished reading did Kay, with characteristic tact, and impeccable timing, draw her last breath.

May God bless her.