



A celebration of the lives of
Derek James Thomas
“Del”



1936- 2018

Woollensbrook Crematorium
Friday 12th October 2018

Ceremony conducted by Accredited Humanists UK Celebrant

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Humanist
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♪ Bert Kaempfert - Bye Bye Blues ♪

♪ Frank Sinatra - I've Got You Under My Skin ♪

The Tribute to Del

Del was born in Hornsey, North London, on 22nd September 1936 to parents Edwin and Alice Thomas. He was the youngest of three boys and grew up with his brothers David and Reggie. It was a happy childhood and though the family was poor, the children had no inkling of any hardship because the family unit was strong and loving and the boys enjoyed relative freedom to express themselves. When Del was about six, he was evacuated to Wales but reunited with the family by the end of the war. While growing up, Del and his brothers would had to wash in a tin bath, but because Del was the youngest he always had the bathwater last. He vividly recalled to his children how his mum would tip the dirty bath water down the steps afterwards. His dad Edwin was a wonderful, loveable rogue who enjoyed a flutter on the horses and the dogs. Del spoke of him with great fondness, relaying the story of how he would take his big brother Reggie out of school to go to visit the dogs, acting as a runner placing bets with the bookies at the most favourable odds.

Del left school at 14 with no qualifications. He took up a manual job in a fireplace factory and various other manufacturing companies, including working as a riveter. He often mentioned he was the fastest riveter the company had and got paid extra accordingly. His literacy skills were not strong but from early on he displayed an incredible gift for speaking.

Del was 21 when he met his future wife Kathleen in 1957; Kath introduced her friend Joan to his brother David which resulted in marriage, and the four of them enjoyed going out together to the roller skating at Alexandra Palace and to the local pubs. In these early days Kath and Del went dancing but they mostly enjoyed an evening out to the pub where he would enjoy a good few pints, a particular photo which illustrates this can be seen later at the wake. Their courtship lasted two years, but up until then the couple were never allowed to sit in Kath's parent's back room, which was kept for "posh" visitors. Instead, they would all sit together in the warmth of the 'scullery', a back room to the kitchen that always had a fire burning. Del and Kath were married in 1959 in Stroud Green and set up home in a garden flat on Ferme Park Road. In 1961 they celebrated the birth of their first child when Colin was born.

By this time, Del has started at HK Furniture, a furniture manufacturer and supplier based in Haringey and which supplied all the big retail establishments like Harrods and Selfridges. Del started out in the post room, working as a clerk, and in time, worked his way up to being sales manager. HK Furniture was to provide Del with not just a living, but the work was to reveal and nurture his true talents: the ability to talk to anyone, and the ability to do a deal. He loved the work at HK where he could banter and tell jokes, entertain the high-end clients, all the while seeking out a good deal for himself and the family from his contacts. Over the years, these deals included cut price suits or holiday accommodation where he had managed to do a skills swap to obtain his bargain.

In 1963 Kath and Del took a loan from Kath's dad Fred and with this the couple were able to buy a property on the brand-new Forres Estate in Hoddesdon. Coming from Hornsey, this was a complete culture change: a move to the countryside, which meant Del having to commute to work for the first time. During the first couple of years he drove to work on a 70cc Honda motorcycle, in wind, rain and snow, eventually swapping this for a van he bought for £40. He then moved onto driving a Morris Minor, and, teaming up with a friend and colleague in Cheshunt, they took it in turns to drive into north London to work, sharing the load. Just prior to the year that the young family moved to Hoddesdon, their second son Neil was born and he was joined in 1965 by their youngest, Barry, who was born at home. The boys had a fabulous time growing up on the Forres Estate; there were so many places to play outdoors and every day after school the boys would join their friends on the football field just up the road. It was a wonderful childhood and Del took to fatherhood with great love and enthusiasm. Kath and Del and the boys enjoyed regular school holidays, staying in Cornwall, Guernsey and Spain. The Spanish holidays always had the same theme: Del would spray himself with mosquito repellent at night, pulling the sheets right up and over his face to avoid being bitten. By the time the morning came, the bed sheet would have ridden down and he awoke with a face covered in bites.

Kath was a strong matriarch and a good organiser. She made all the big decisions in the family and for much of the marriage, she was the driving force: managing the money and managing the boys. She used to keep a green tin with coin slots in the top, each one for a different payment: gas, electricity, rates, food. She was mainly responsible for their social life, tailoring it so that the five of them were a close family unit, relying always on each other. Del was happy with this arrangement, always amenable and regularly conceding in an argument, unless of course he strongly disagreed with something - and then he would not back down! The family used to eat seated round the dining table, and it was over dinner that there was likely to be a disagreement; and anyone disagreeing with Kath would experience the strong matriarch. At these times, Del remained acquiescent, but all the while tapping one of the boys under the table in a conspiratorial gesture of camaraderie! But at heart, Del was an easy-going man who enjoyed going with the flow. He was never extravagant because this was in keeping with his upbringing. The couple rarely had an evening out once the children were born, but they would occasionally splash out on a Chinese takeaway to eat while watching Match of the Day as a treat. The angriest he ever got was when his three boys kept mis-behaving when he'd shout his go-to saying "Pack it in, will ya!"

But Del was at his happiest when he was busy. As well as the day job at HK Furniture, Del also worked weekends as a window cleaner and three evenings a week at Merck Sharpe and Dohme, cleaning and polishing floors; on Thursday evenings he went door to door collecting the Vernon's football pools, often accompanied by one of the boys during school holidays. He was a very personable and likeable fellow, showing enthusiasm for everything he did. People automatically warmed to Del because he was approachable and friendly and when you looked at him, what you saw was a dapper, well-groomed gentleman. The activity didn't stop at weekends either; Del was a talented painter and decorator, redecorating the house inside at the drop of a hat and painting the outside almost yearly. He also had his chores which Kath allocated at home of vacuuming and dusting the house every Saturday and Sunday morning, the three boys lifting their feet off the carpets to give their dad access

while they watched TV. And he did all of this with great humour and energy, joking to his boys as he dusted the television he was wiping the picture off the screen. But the one thing that Del couldn't do was DIY; he was terrible at it! He couldn't put up a shelf or mend a cupboard, but you knew if Del had tried to have a go because his signature black gaffa tape would be all over the project, holding together hinges, shelves or cupboard doors. Regardless of what it was though, Del had to get things done quickly and once he started a job he had to finish it no matter what. In this, he has an excellent work ethic and he lived by his mantra of "never put off till tomorrow what you can do today".

According to Colin, his dad was always confidently enthusiastic about most things and it showed in his personality. He always thought he could easily do something but was often proved wrong. When the boys were young, there was a Dad's Football Match arranged locally on the pitches opposite the local Sheredes Primary School, home of Barry's team The Hoddesdon Dynamos. Del and the boys duly turned up to the pitch, excited that they were going to see their Dad play. The lead up had been fantastic, with Del laying it on thick that in the old days he was fast, that the equipment was top notch: leather football boots, and laces on the footballs. The team positions were selected and Del's opposite number was an old boy in desert rat shorts, a vest and plimsolls. Just prior to kick-off, Del looked over to the boys, surreptitiously pointing and laughing that he had as his mark a rather scrawny fellow who resembled Charles Hawtry from the Carry on films. The whistle blew and the game started at a fast pace. Del lasted about ten minutes, coming off for an early substitution, gasping for breath and feeling sick as his mark had run rings around him! Kath never let him forget it and neither did the boys!

He was a fabulous dad to his boys. He played football with them as well as cricket, pitch and putt and swimming and diving at the Edmonton and Harlow baths. But perhaps the words of the writer Umberto Eco say this better: "I believe that what we become, depends on what our fathers teach us at odd moments, when they aren't trying to teach us. We are formed by little scraps of wisdom."

Del was essentially a creative man who used his gift for language to convince others to get him the best deal, whether this was a car, a holiday or a carpet. He shone when he entered into the banter, he had the gift of a good spiel, and was often unintentionally funny, getting mixed up with the names of the rich and famous: he called Roy Orbison *Brian Orbison* and the comic Mike Yarwood *Frank Harwood*. Even addressing his own sons, Del would have to go through the whole list - ColinBarryNeil - until he arrived at the name he was trying to remember.

Barry recalls a story in which his dad took him and Neil to see QPR versus Liverpool – this would have been some 37 years ago. Del wanted him and the boys to have seats and so, there began Del's famous, skilful haggling process – with a ticket tout no less! The price kept coming down and every minute the time got closer to kick off. At first, Neil and Barry began to get worried about missing the start of the game; then they worried that they would miss the entire game, but Del was determined to get the best deal he could. The clock was ticking and the ticket eventually fell to just above face value; but Del wasn't happy! A minute before kick-off there was a stand-off; then all of a sudden the tout said "Go on then have 'em at cost as I won't be able to sell them now!" Bingo! Del gave a wry smile and said

“Exactly - so you’d better give them to me for a quid Less!” and that is exactly what happened; the tout stormed off moaning loudly! Del turned to his boys smiling and said “Knew he’d do that; come on let’s get our seats!”

Let us pause for a moment to hear the words of a poem called All is Well:

All Is Well

Death is nothing at all,
I have only slipped into the next room
I am I and you are you
Whatever we were to each other, that we are still.
Call me by my old familiar name,
Speak to me in the easy way which you always used
Put no difference in your tone,
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow
Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes we enjoyed together.
Play, smile, think of me, pray for me.
Let my name be ever the household word that it always was,
Let it be spoken without effect, without the trace of shadow on it.
Life means all that it ever meant.
It is the same as it ever was, there is unbroken continuity.
Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight?
I am waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near,
Just around the corner.
All is well.



In 1981 HK Furniture was taken over by new management and they offered the staff redundancy or a pay cut. Del was proud in his work and felt it an insult to take the pay cut, opting instead for redundancy. This change was very hard on Del who had given almost twenty years to the company. But as you know, Del couldn't abide being idle and so he took a job with his son Neil at Harrods. Once again, he was back in the furniture industry: an industry that he loved and knew so much about. Systems and processes at Harrods were very different from what Del was used to and there was much to learn and it became apparent that the work didn't suit him. And so, through a pal he found work at CAP, a computer software firm based in Watford where he became facilities manager. Del absolutely loved the work at CAP: he was kept busy looking after every aspect of the building and the health and safety of all the staff but what he thrived on most was interacting with other people, an opportunity to banter and joke and the development of connections to yet more deals.

But despite the wheeler dealer side to Del's nature, he was a deeply trusting man and his trusting of people could sometimes backfire on him. In 1979 Del took Colin along to buy him his first car, a 1967 British racing green mini with a white roof and sliding windows. To the young Colin the car was an absolute looker! Dad and son had a look round it inspecting it for damage, but it was very shiny with no dents. They opened the doors to look inside and though the car was tidy inside the carpet was soaking wet. Colin mentioned this to his dad who then said to the chap selling it: "The floor's all wet mate!" to which he replied "Oh yeah, I left the window open when I was hosing it down." "OK then," said Del and they went ahead and bought it for a hundred quid. Two weeks later, the floor in the back disintegrated when Colin's mates got in the back; "No problem!" Says Del, "nothing a bit of ply wood and black tape wouldn't fix!" A week after that, the sub-frame also disintegrated. The car was rotten! The Bank of Dad was employed to undertake repairs with absolutely no gripes from him as Colin thought, looking back, that his dad felt wholly responsible.



As Del came up to retirement, he took a job as a salesman at Dreams Beds in Potters Bar. He loved it! Once again, Del was able to revisit his gift for retail sales, joking with the clients and developing a warm rapport with them. He was truly incorrigible and proud of the fact that the elderly female customers kept on coming back to see him. Del worked to get the best for his customers; his strong moral compass directed him to finding the best deals to suit the financial circumstances of his regulars and though he often sought opportunities that would suit himself, he wanted to do right by others too.

Del loved a bargain; it positively filled him with joy to get a discount. Neil remembers his dad proudly showing him his new dartboard - acquired from a local charity shop. Del then proceeded to explain that the dartboard had been on sale for a tenner but that he had managed to knock them down to a fiver! He couldn't help himself, even in a charity shop! Naturally, Del got a lot of stick from the family for that!

He loved all the classic British comedy that adorned Britain television on Saturday nights throughout the 70s and 80s. Morecambe and Wise; Benny Hill; Tommy Cooper; Only Fools and Horses. But he hated soap operas and if there were performers he didn't like on the TV you'd know about it! Essentially, Del was a family man who centred his life on the boys, enjoying just a few pursuits for himself which included his Wednesday darts night at the working men's club.

Retirement was difficult for Del; there is only so much decorating and gardening that a man can do and though he was very good at both, these were projects that no longer needed repeating. They went on holidays several times a year, however, no doubt as a result of a cunning deal that Del had cooked up. In the 1990s he and Kath moved to Royston next door to Susie's parents Norman and Louvain. The couple were older than Del and Kath and this gave them the opportunity to look in on them and have company. The move also enabled them to be mortgage-free. However, the move was difficult for Kath who had moved away from all of her friends. By 1998 Del and Kath moved house again, but this time back to Welwyn Garden City to be near Kath's mum who was frail and needed to be looked after. About five years ago, Colin took his Dad to the doctor and being a bit of a hypochondriac, Del complained that he thought he'd lost weight; indeed, Del had lost a little weight in his later years compared to how he used to be, but the doctor duly weighed him, saying that he was the exact same weight as in the previous year. Del said "That can't be right! Look at these trousers," undoing the belt and holding the waistband away from his tummy showing a good three- or four-inch gap. "Hmm," said the doctor, "How long have you had those trousers for Mr. Thomas?" Del replied "Oh, about 12 years!"

Tragically, Kath died in May of 2013. Her passing was sudden and unexpected and utterly devastating for Del who had been with his partner for 54 years. Before Kath died she used to regularly tell the boys: "You don't know what I have to put up with," when talking about their dad. They soon came to realise that Kath had protected her husband, doing everything for him, so that it was only when she died, his vulnerabilities became apparent. He kept his home immaculately and in the first years following his diagnosis of dementia, he still vacuumed and dusted the house as he had done for years. The family also provided much assistance to Del when needed during this time. Barry's wife Claire cooked meals for him which he could easily freeze and then cook in the microwave. Neil's wife Sue provided a

much-needed weekly laundry service and Colin's wife Susie visited a couple of times a week to help with shopping and to accompany him to appointments. The boys were constantly on call to help with anything that arose on a day to day basis, from working in the garden to arranging and accompanying Del on hospital appointments. Kath's brothers also had constant contact with Del, Roger with kind weekly social phone calls and Jeff, who lived in the next street, dropping in almost every day to check on Del and see if he needed any help.

The Reflection

Let us now take a few moments for you to reflect on some of the wonderful experiences you have had with Del. Those of you with religious faith may like to use these moments for your own private prayer. As you reflect back on your memories of Del you will hear Andy Williams singing Remember, from the album Solitaire.

♪ Andy Williams - Remember ♪

Del's sons have chosen a poem which they feel reflects their feelings about their dad:

Not, how did he die, but how did he live?

Not, how did he die, but how did he live?
Not, what did he gain, but what did he give?
These are the units to measure the worth
Of a man as a man, regardless of his birth.
Nor what was his church, nor what was his creed?
But had he befriended those really in need?
Was he ever ready, with words of good cheer,
To bring back a smile, to banish a tear?
Not what did the sketch in the newspaper say,
But how many were sorry when he passed away?

Anonymous



Ladies and gentlemen, we have now come to the end of today's gathering. As you leave the chapel now, you will hear the Travelling Wilbury's singing Handle With Care! Del loved them and this particular track has *Brian Orbison* singing.

And as you leave, look after yourselves, and each other.

Thank you.

♪ *Travelling Wilbury's - Handle With Care* ♪

