

A Celebration of the Life of
Elaine Thomas



26th June 1950 – 10th January 2019
Accrington Crematorium, 11th February
2019

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The Tribute

Elaine fitted a huge amount into her 68 years and was an enormous influence on everyone she met.

We're going to start the story of her life by asking Paul to speak on behalf of the family, a contribution written by Annette:

"Our Elaine" arrived in this world 6 weeks premature which was quite an achievement 68 years ago but Elaine made it through and from that day on was a survivor and a force to be reckoned with.

Elaine knew from a very early age that her goal in life was to succeed in every challenge she faced.

She was firstly given the task of always looking out for Annette, her naughty cheeky younger sister. She did this without ever complaining and on one of these occasions when Annette was two years old and had sat in a dirty puddle of water in her best Sunday coat and was covered from head to toe in mud, it was Elaine who got shouted at by our parents but she just accepted her punishment.

We had a wonderful happy childhood with our parents who provided us with many delightful holidays. One memorable moment was when Elaine was made to get on a ride at the funfair because Annette went on and on everyday of the holiday pestering to go on a ride. Because Elaine was the eldest she was also made to sit in the front seat of the Mickey Mouse Car. Poor Elaine came off that ride battered and bruised and had turned green much to the amusement of her horrid little sister.

Almost every Sunday during the summer months we used to pack a picnic basket and walk up to the top of the Coppice on a

beautiful hot sunny day and simply spend all day up there taking in the views and Elaine and our dad particularly loved watching all the rare birds through the binoculars all of which Elaine knew the names of.

She had the most marvellous brain which she was able to use to her advantage as she studied so hard in her years at both Primary School and The High School for Girls.

Elaine made friends with two lovely girls at The High School, Julia and Lindsay and even though they all had different characters they just gelled so well together even when they all liked the same boy!

When Elaine left home to go to the Manchester Polytechnic she became even more quirky and her dress sense was so unique. She purchased an old fur coat from a second hand shop which was literally falling in bits with the fur coming off in patches. She was warned by our dad not to ever come to Accrington in that thing. But Elaine did what Elaine wanted to do and most certainly did come home in her adored fur coat. Elaine was never ever cheeky or rude to our parents she just had a very diplomatic way with her.

Wherever Elaine resided due to her work she would invite her family and friends to stay with her. We were all given such wonderful holidays. When she lived and worked in Belfast both Annette and Elaine's nephew Paul had some memorable holidays with her. In the early years Elaine didn't drive and so relied on public transport which just added to our fabulous days out with her. We would prepare a packed lunch and off we would go by bus, train and even boats to get to wherever she had chosen.

Our mum and dad were both incredibly proud of Elaine and of all her achievements in life especially when she was awarded a CBE. Our mum, Annette and Brian were able to attend this wonderful ceremony which made our hearts burst with pride. Our dad had unfortunately passed away a few months before the Ceremony but he did know about it and was able to tell Elaine how proud he was of her and always had been.

We became a 5 generation family in 2017 which Elaine was so immensely proud of.

"Our Elaine" will be forever in our hearts. She gave such love and joy to all who knew her.

Thank you, Paul

And now Viv, a friend from her years in Northern Ireland, will talk to us:

A week ago, some past students and colleagues of Elaine's met together in her memory, in a Belfast gallery, just a hundred yards from where she worked for over twenty years.

Many memories were shared: of Elaine as teacher, colleague, artist and friend.

Some stories were very simple, and very touching. A past student said that he thinks of Elaine every day when he paints; he remembers how she advised him about his brushstrokes...and now, he passes that same advice onto his students ...and I thought, yes that's Elaine, good counsel, fine communicator, forever memorable.

One of her fellow lecturers recounted how, when she was Dean, Elaine had helped him make a difficult decision. Because she made it clear how much he was valued, and with her support and friendship, he stayed in NI rather than taking up a post overseas and never regretted his choice.

Elaine's time in Belfast coincided with the worst times of violence in NI and several of her students alluded to this in speaking about how Elaine's creative energy and her real interest in her students contributed to a unique place in the city. It was not just art practice for these young people but a safe space, an alternative to what they were living through. I never heard Elaine make any overt political statement, rather she lived the example of one who valued people, whatever their background. One lecturer, an immigrant to NI in the 1970s, and who had faced discrimination, said that Elaine was free of prejudice.

Another colleague, who had known Elaine since their own days as students, explained how she came into Manchester art college and then to Belfast as a breath of fresh air, cutting across the prevailing art current of cool minimalism with her drive, her excitement in the creative process and her delight in other people. I think back forty years and I remember the talk she gave to us young students about her own work. She talked about finding the inspiration for her figures in everyday life, revealing our common humanity and individual foibles.

Yes, the characters in her work were often humorous but they arose from her own, well hid, vulnerability as well as from her observations of people - including herself – recording with a sympathetic, or a critical, eye - and humour was only part of the picture.

While her artworks of recent years utilise quite restrained colours and markmaking, in Elaine's early work excitement and energy fairly burst off the page... expressive, gestural, full of life. Like her hands.

*Now, I think of her hands, so eloquent, so festooned with her rings
And I feel so sad that they are silenced and bare.*

I'm sure she would be happy to see us here for her today but the Elaine I knew would be exasperated that she left when she still had so much more to do.

Now Rod, Elaine's long term colleague and friend, and Italian Scrabble opponent, will talk on behalf of himself, and Mark Hunt, who cannot be here today

It is hard to believe that we are here to celebrate the life of our dear friend Elaine and to mourn her shocking and sudden passing. I have found it so hard to find words to describe the loss of such a fine person, a wonderful friend, colleague, artist and companion. I am, however, honoured to be asked to speak the words of some other dear friends of our beloved Elaine who could not be here

today. They speak so eloquently of the exceptional person that we will always love and remember, that I have no need to say more.

First, the words of Mark Hunt, her deputy for many years at the University for the Creative Arts, and close friend.

Members of Elaine's family, guests, colleagues and friends. I am very sorry that I cannot be with you in person but hope the words that follow will convey the esteem that we hold for Elaine.

Today we say goodbye to Elaine and mark the passing of someone who touched the lives of many people and who was held in great esteem by the higher education sector and beyond.

I was deeply saddened to learn about the sudden death of Elaine. She was my boss, my colleague, my mentor and above all my friend. My words today cannot describe the loss I feel at this time of such a wonderful and kind person.

As many of you know Elaine was originally appointed as the Director of the Surrey Institute of Art & Design in 2000. I joined Elaine at the start of 2001 for what would be a ten-year journey of working together to create something that was very special to both of us.

Elaine was the driving force behind wanting to create that 'special something'. She was passionate about education and the creative process. So, what was that 'special something'?

In 2003/2004 we began developing plans for the potential of creating an arts university and discussions soon took place in secret with our good friends Vaughan Grylls and David Buss from the Kent Institute of Art & Design. Both Vaughan and David shared our vision to create a University and through much discussion the merger between the Kent Institute of Art & Design and the Surrey Institute of Art & Design finally took place in 2005, to form the University College for the Creative Arts. Elaine was named the Institutions first Rector.

In this role Elaine spearheaded the transformation of the institution from a 'University College' to a 'University' in 2008,

creating the UK's first specialist creative arts university. Elaine by this time was known across the university sector for her passionate advocacy for creative arts education, and for her commitment to delivering a first-class student experience. Her spirit of resilience [a word she liked] and good humour always saw her through the most challenging of situations.

During this time Elaine created a team at UCA that strove to be the best, some of that team are present today. But in driving forward her ambition she had a talent for taking people with her on the journey. Throughout my whole time working with Elaine I never saw her get angry or moody, even if she didn't get her own way! [which on occasions she didn't] Her management style was one of compassion and working with all staff to get the best out of them. Her first priority was always to ensure that the staff and students of the University were supported, and having time for all, no matter who they were. She gave a voice to those who were not heard, and supported equality of opportunity in all that she did.

Elaine retired from her role as Vice-Chancellor at UCA in September 2011, and later that year was awarded the CBE for her outstanding contribution to the creative arts in Higher Education. Elaine's return to her creative work was important to her in her retirement, unfortunately that has been cut all too short.

Elaine has been taken far too early and I will miss her deeply and I have no doubt that she will be very much missed by all those who knew and worked with her at UCA and beyond.

Although it is Elaine's range of achievements that we will remember, it is her giving heart that we will miss. She was the friend and the colleague who was always the first to pick up the phone and say, 'what can I do to help' She was the boss admired by her staff. She was the person who sent birthday wishes and thankyou notes to her staff.

Her legacy and the work she did will live on and acts as an important memory of the enormous contribution she made to higher education in the creative arts. Her family and friends should

be rightly proud of that legacy on the day that we celebrate Elaine's life.

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The passage of time never really heals the memory of such a loss, but we carry on, because we have to, because our loved ones, colleagues and friends would want us to, We carry on.

And now Dianne, Elaine's long time friend, with whom she shared so many magic travels, including that final one

Professor Elaine Thomas: CBE....Emeritus Prof...former VC and so much more... creative artist par excellence... feminist & scholar.... arts ambassador...the most fiercely competitive individual any of us will ever know...a passionate defender of fairness...and, in all, a truly impressive, remarkable woman of substance...of style....and of standards (indeed, I can sense Elaine just looking down on me now and checking that I am getting this right...)

And of course Elaine is also that warm, funny, generous, loving and beloved daughter, sister and friend....she remains in our hearts as mentor, inspirational role model; good neighbour and to this wonderful gathering here today, drawn from so many places in her rich life, she is "simply the best"... and so too for the many, many friends unable to be with us, but who have literally showered us with their sad and joyous messages

Elaine: a woman Vice Chancellor – unusual in 2000.....with a brilliant Guardian article celebrating her glorious feminisation of the erstwhile male and boring academic robe; and with a "glass ceiling" book chapter, where she confessed to earlier northern schoolgirl lack-of-awareness as she lustily sang at Accrington all-girls-grammar, the school hymn: "let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us..."; all of which her rebellious nature later went on to challenge, nurturing brilliance and creativity in her women students and friends..

Elaine: whose fitness and exercise regime left most of us (literally) standing; complemented by an uber-healthy vegetarian diet that brooked no compromise...porridge & molasses, fresh custard & broccoli (not necessarily in that combination!) make for a very happy Elaine – not to mention nuts and scones....and as she says in her glass ceiling chapter, and I quote: “ I don’t go in for hobbies; I’m inclined towards obsessions!”

Elaine the curious and insatiable traveller....exploring cultures and continents with a voracious appetite; and, especially, developing a passion for all things Italian: culture; food; fashion...but particularly warm Italian friendships - as my enormous folder of whatsapp, text and email messages now evidences. And who but the obsessively competitive Elaine would acquire not one but two sets of Italian scrabble, so she could challenge HERSELF, playing solo, both at home and abroad...pity the loser in that unwinnable contest

Elaine...a person of such fun: with a reputation as a dramatic presence on the dance floor at gigs; a great person to share her favourite scandi-noir dramas with; and a terrific companion for long and winding country walks, with Elaine’s keen eye for unusual and highly visual finds – collecting porcupine quills?? And a lady with the unique skill to ‘hold court’ from a sunbed on our Italian beach and to draw crowds of admirers; an elegant and persuasive presence, remembered by friends and strangers alike as the lady of the silver rings, each one telling its own story....

So, in your absence Elaine, where will I now seek imaginative holidays.... who will correct (somewhat pedantically, but always affectionately) my less-than-perfect-grammar.... how will I know NOT to buy a disastrous style item without subtle guidance from my fashionista friend..... and who will I share my deep secrets with...the joys and frustrations that you so generously embrace....maybe I’ll just carry on sending you silent text messages...

Elaine, you leave us all with huge challenges for our own next steps....But importantly you have bequeathed to us the most

treasured of "takeaways"memories and mementos from the precious and privileged time we spent with you...we celebrate

-your retirement years and their creative legacy - astonishing both in depth and richness

-your leadership and friendship which inspired us not only to be the best that we can be but also to help others to be their best selves...

-and, finally your values: "family and friends first"...Mary, Annette, Brian and Paul in particular, but so many, many more....we remain indebted to you for your life and your love.

Thank you, Dianne.

The last time I saw Elaine, we had lunch and went to a gallery as usual, then ended up rushing to get our trains. I found myself slightly ahead as we walked, and Elaine remarked on this, saying she was "used to being in the lead". And in the lead she was, throughout her life, for her gender, her sector, and with all that sheer passion you've just heard described.

We all know about Elaine's passion for Italy, so here is a coda. I'm going to ask Rod to come up here again, to read us one of the many messages which have come from there:

This is just one of the messages that Dianne has shared with me from Elaine's many friends in Italy, so beautifully speaks of how Elaine touched and enhanced the lives of the friends she made wherever she travelled. I will read it in Italian as it was written as well as English.

Un messaggio per la mamma e la sorella di Elaine

*Bella, sincera, solare, simpaticissima, dolce,educata, piacevole, intelligente, colta, disponibile,ironica, innamorata della vita, dinamica, ottimista, fantastica, MERAVIGLIOSA. .. Elaine... Che fortuna ho avuto di conoscerLA...La vedevo solo in estate in Italia agli Argonauti,ma mi sembrava di conoscerla da sempre...Era così piacevole parlare e stare con Lei... Ci sentivamo con WA durante l'anno, e anche negli ultimi giorni, mi aveva detto il 7 gennaio che stava molto meglio ... Le ho voluto e le voglio tanto bene... Carissime mamma e sorella di Elaine vi sono tanto vicina in questo grande dolore... Vi abbraccio insieme alla mia famiglia:
Antonella, Luigi, Giovanna e Alessandra Palazzo da Napoli ♥*

A message for Elaine's mother and sister

Beautiful, sincere, sunny, really nice, sweet, polite, pleasant, intelligent, well-educated, helpful, ironic, loved life, dynamic, optimistic, fantastic, WONDERFUL... Elaine... We spoke during the year and also towards the end, she had told me on 7 January that she was feeling much better... I loved and still love her very much... Dearest mother and sister of Elaine you are in my thoughts at this very difficult time... Hugs from me and my family.

*How lucky to have known her... I would only see her in the summer in Italy at the Argonauti, but it seemed to me I had always known her... It was so pleasant to talk to and spend time with her...
Antonella, Luigi, Giovanna e Alessandra Palazzo da Napoli ♥*

In Antonella's words

'Bella, dolce, MERAVIGLIOSA Elaine'

We will miss you so much.

And I just wanted to close with some words from Elaine's own website, about what inspired her work: *"[in] Turkish shadow puppets found in a bazaar in Istanbul, Picasso's sketch books and Jackson Pollock's psychoanalytical drawings. via the crazy inventiveness of early animated films, the exuberant caricatures of a Gilbert & Sullivan opera, the illusionistic choreography of Philip Genty and the distorted acrobatics of the State Circus in Leningrad. It encompasses, too, the sexually ambivalent sculpture of Louise Bourgeois, the self-parody of Victoria Wood, the obsessive detail of the artist Fahlström, and the posturing and machinations of Rowan Atkinson's first and best Blackadder."*

The ever eclectic, ever fascinating, Elaine.