

A celebration of life

Frankie Karena Murison

28th December 1956 – 24th July 2017

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Tribute

Frankie was born in Kingsbury, London, the eldest of Jan Wagstaff's four children: Frankie, Mandy, Jonathan and Jo (the twins). She also had a brother, Geoff, with whom she shared a father, Peter Murison. She was christened Frances, but never liked the name and later changed it by deed poll. People here may variously know her as Frances, Fran, Frankie, and even Franny. I'll stick to Frankie, since it was the name she consciously chose.

Jan, a dancer and actress, was a powerful figure in the family, and as the matriarch, has been much missed over the last ten years – Frankie said she found herself rather reluctantly being edged into that matriarch role.

Because of Jan's work and relationships, the family moved around a lot but eventually settled in Hove for a time, where Frankie went to school - when she was at school, that is – she once got expelled for kicking a nun at a convent school. It was while undertaking a "Family & Social Care" course at the then Brighton Technical College that she got to know Fran Reeves, who became a lifelong friend – once Frankie had forgiven her for the monstrosity of a peach dress she had to wear as Fran's bridesmaid.

Frankie joined the police force at 18. As a young WPC, her most memorable exploit happened when she was on the beat at night in Shoreham, when she was made aware that there was a swan in the High Street. On her own, and completely clueless, she managed to shepherd it into a cell at the police station, booking it in as "Mr Swan" and writing it up a charge sheet for loitering.

But within a couple of years, she decided the police life wasn't for her, and she married Martin, running a B&B in Regency Square in Brighton with him and his parents. She didn't much enjoy that either – she could never get the toast quite right, and it usually ended up with one side burnt, which she tried to disguise by putting the burned side down on the plate. In these days of Tripadvisor, she'd never get away with it. So she trained as a social worker, specializing in working with children.

When she was 28, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and though it was successfully treated, she was advised she ought to have children quickly if she wanted them. And so Lucy was born, and with Lucy came another change of direction. Once she had a child of her own, she couldn't bear her work with children who were suffering harm or deprivation, so she started to work as a childminder.

By the time Lucy was ready to go to school, Frankie was ready to start work at Varndean College, where she stayed until a couple of months ago. She started as a reprographics technician, and whilst working and raising a daughter, she obtained a degree in Education Management and also trained as a counsellor. This led to her role as Staff Welfare Officer at the college, and she was a hugely popular and supportive member of the team. I'm going to read a few excerpts from the tributes which have arrived from her colleagues:

“As a newish member of staff, Frankie made me so welcome, and helped me through the confusing first few weeks, way above the call of duty. Her communication skills and ease of building relationships were excellent, which makes an enormous difference in a large college.”

“She was well loved by everyone - an unusual accolade in a workplace.”

“Her comforting words and wisdom saw me through one of the most difficult phases of my life. She certainly knew when a hug was in order and I could not thank her enough. I'm so glad that she knew how grateful I was for her unwavering support - she helped me through some dark times.”

“I just wanted to say what an amazing lady Frankie was - she supported me so much over the years at Varndean- when there was no one else to talk to - she was always there - no matter what.Thank you for sharing your mum with us”

Frankie's passion for unicorns (and yes, she did specifically request that wonderful floral tribute), began when her mother, Jan, was in St Wilfrid's hospice ten years ago. Frankie had bought a singing unicorn toy as a gift for Jan, and her enchantment with the mythical beasts was reinforced when, house-hunting, she came across Unicorn Cottage. Though she loved her home and had a very definite style in interior decoration (including broomsticks, unicorn statues, crystals and many, many photos!), she never felt quite comfortable in the suburban, bungalow dominated world she lived in – she used to tell people that her behavior had got her “banned from coffee mornings”.

And she loved real animals, too, particularly dogs and wolves – Lucy and Phil showed me a wonderful picture of her being kissed on the nose by a wolf during a day out with Phil at a wolf sanctuary. There were lots of German Shepherds over the years, including Benny One Nut (because that was all he had) and Marbles (because she'd lost them). At one time they had a giant Malteser-eating house rabbit called Kangaroo, who would regularly chew through the Christmas tree light cables. Lucy and Ollie told me that when their dog Grace stayed with Frankie and Phil, she was thoroughly spoiled. They used to measure her belly before and after the visit, and the difference could be as much as 4”. Mind you, she was always trying to fatten Ollie up too, buying him packets of Monster Munch which he never had the heart to say he wasn't fond of!

And she loved musicals, of course – she had a Phantom of the Opera tattoo on her arm, and saw some shows a dozen times, her all time favourite being Wicked, which appealed to the pagan in her. As a family, they used to go the Rocky Horror Show whenever the tour came nearby, on one memorable time being accompanied in Southend-on-Sea by her brother Geoff in his fishnets and red high heels. She'd watch live music too – everything from gigs played by her daughter and son in law Ollie, to ticketed concerts. Frankie went with her sisters to see Joan Armatrading - but they got thrown out for heckling the support act.

She could be quite outrageous – she once placed a rude “do not disturb” notice on colleague and friend Bev’s office door, leaving Bev panicking that half the college had seen it and assumed Bev had written it herself! Frankie also famously squeezed the bottom of a Jack Sparrow lookalike at Mandy’s Halloween party whilst dressed as Morticia Addams! But she could also be quite child-like, setting her bubble-blowing machine to pump bubbles into the garden, and having a toy cupboard in the kitchen filled with fairies and snow globes.

Frankie’s brother, Jonathan, will now talk to us:

When I sat down to write these words, there were so many things that I wanted to say about Franny that I didn’t know where to start. She was many different things to all of us; Mother, Sister, Partner, Aunt, Friend and of course, more recently Grandmother. She always made time for everyone; providing a listening ear, offering sound advice and constant support. Franny was not only beautiful on the outside; she had a beautiful soul and was able to see the beauty in others. She took her time, forming her own thoughts and opinions about the people and things around her.

Something this last few months with Franny has shown me, is the importance of living for the moment whilst enjoying and appreciating everything and everyone around you. A quote that comes to mind is “Life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass; it’s about learning to dance in the rain”. So many of us wait for the right moment before starting to live our lives - which is such a shame. Life isn’t about avoiding the inevitable storms of life but learning to live with them. So sing, dance and do whatever you can to enjoy your life no matter what the weather might be.

Although it is very difficult to come to terms with losing Franny so quickly, I feel incredibly grateful that her presence has blessed our lives. She no longer has to suffer as she has done over the past months and we all must find comfort from knowing that she will always be a light in our hearts. We are all better people today because she was part of our lives and I am honoured to be her brother. Words cannot describe how much she will be missed.

I didn’t get the chance to tell Franny just how important she was to me although I know in my heart she knew. But a special memory that I will always hold dear is a letter she wrote to me some 25 years ago containing the lyrics of a song. We all have those songs which touch us in certain ways; music has that ability to stir emotions, to ignite memories. For me, no song is more poignant than the one she included in that letter, "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother":

*The road is long...with many a winding turn
That leads us to who knows where... who knows when
But I'm strong...strong enough to carry him
He ain't heavy, he's my brother*

...

*So on we go...his welfare is of my concern
No burden is he to bear...we'll get there
For I know...he would not encumber me
He ain't heavy, he's my brother*

...

*If I'm laden at all...I'm laden with sadness
That everyone's heart...isn't filled with the gladness
Of love for one another*

...

*It's a long, long road...from which there is no return
While we're on the way to there why not share
And the load doesn't weigh me down at all
He ain't heavy, he's my brother*

....

*She's my sister
She ain't heavy, she's my sister...*

Thank you, Jonathan.

Frankie enjoyed spending time with her brothers and their partners. For her birthday, which was just after Christmas, Frankie would usually host a pizza lunch at her house for all her family to celebrate with her and catch up with each other. Frankie and her sisters, Mandy and Jo, are collectively known as the Witches of Eastbourne, (though this might come as a surprise to them!) One of their favourite pastimes was spending an evening together drinking prosecco. This often led to Frankie's dramatic streak showing through when her inhibitions were loosened, and from time to time she would break into dramatic soliloquies which her mother had taught her. The one Lucy recalls the most, even more than the Scottish limericks taught to Frankie by her father and uncle in childhood, was Joan of Arc's speech from Shaw's St Joan – I'm going to read some of this now, as it seems to really represent Frankie's love of life.

....They told me you were fools, and that I was not to listen to your fine words nor trust your charity. You promised me my life; but you lied. You think that life is nothing but not being stone dead. It is not the bread and water I fear: I can live on bread: when have I asked for more? It is no hardship to drink water if the water be clean. Bread has no sorrow for me, and water no affliction. But to shut me from the light of the sky and the sight of the fields and flowers; to chain my feet so that I can never again ride with the soldiers nor climb the hills; to make me breathe foul damp darknessall this is worse than the furnace in the bible that was heated seven times. I could do without my warhorse; I could drag about in a skirt; I could let the banners and the trumpets and the knights and soldiers pass me and leave me behind as they leave the other women, if only I could still hear the wind in the trees, the larks in the sunshine, [and] the young lambs crying through the healthy frost..... But without these things I cannot live..... That is my last word to you"

She and Martin parted ways in 2008. And then it was Lucy who did the matchmaking between Frankie and Phil. Phil was a work colleague of Lucy's, who used to come and sit on her desk in his Doc Martens and talk about music. Lucy knew that both he and her mother were trying internet dating, so she mentioned a "friend" to him who was also trying internet dating, and things went from there. Their first date was in Crawley to see the film Ted – Phil can't remember why they chose that, and he didn't know Crawley very well and got lost, arriving only just in time to see the film. But by the end of the evening, they were holding hands.

She introduced Phil to musicals and theatre, which he quickly found he loved. When they went together to see Julian Clary at the Congress, it was even more filthy than they'd anticipated, and many of the sedate Eastbourne audience left. Before the interval, Clary announced that he was going to pull heterosexual men out of the audience in the second half and humiliate them. Frankie and Phil were sitting at the end of a row, and she swapped places with him to protect him. Just as well, because it was the man at the end of the row behind them who was pulled out of his seat and made to parade around in a pink latex body suit.

Frankie and Phil loved walking together, particularly on coastal walks, locally, and in Devon (where she illicitly fed the wild ponies.) They worked on the garden, cultivating the growing collection of Christmas trees that they hadn't the heart to throw away, so planted in the borders. Frankie loved attracting birds into the garden, and they had a visiting hedgehog.

Lucy was of course her closest friend (even if Frankie wasn't that pleased with the fact she'd been introduced to Phil as such), and she adored her, and Ollie, and the music they made together. Lucy was always her companion, often in somewhat outrageous activities. They went to Paris together when Lucy was 15, and Frankie got so drunk at the Moulin Rouge that she could not walk back to the hotel. Lucy had to drag her into McDonalds and feed her chicken burgers still she sobered up. But Lucy was quick to tell me that Frankie wasn't a big drinker, it was just that alcohol affected her very quickly – a single Jaegerbomb at Geoff and Louise's wedding had a huge and hilarious impact on her.

Frankie had wanted a grandchild for a long time. Phil talks about her gazing into the windows of children's clothes shops and toy shops, and though she didn't exactly put Lucy and Ollie under pressure, her longing was obvious. So when Lucy told her, over a FaceTime chat, that she was expecting Lola, she simply exploded with happiness. Lola arrived three weeks early, at 1.10am. Lucy waited until Frankie was "active" on FaceBook before calling and saying "Are you free at 2pm today?", and when asked why, responded "You'd better come and meet your granddaughter".

It's a great sadness that she only had a few months to enjoy her lovely granddaughter, and that Lola won't remember her amazing Nanna – though I'm sure she'll always be entertained with the stories told by her Grandad Phil. Family was very precious to Frankie, and she was very proud of the achievements of her nieces, nephews and step-grandchildren.

Her brother Geoff will now read us a poem, based on the words of David Harkins.

Do not shed tears when I have gone but smile instead because I have lived.

Do not shut your eyes and pray to God that I'll come back but open your eyes and see all that I have left behind.

I know your heart will be empty because you cannot see me but still I want you to be full of the love we shared.

You can turn your back on tomorrow and live only for yesterday or you can be happy for tomorrow because of what happened between us yesterday.

You can remember me and grieve that I have gone or you can cherish my memory and let it live on.

You can cry and lose yourself, become distraught and turn your back on the world or you can do what I want - smile, wipe away the tears, learn to love again and go on.

Frankie only found out in June that she was seriously ill, and planning for her departure became her next big project. She had already dropped down to part time at work, but she wouldn't give it up completely, and was still talking to people just a couple of weeks before she died, saying "I can't let them down".

Because Frankie was a woman who was always there for everyone – for Phil, Lucy, Ollie, Lola, for her siblings and her work colleagues. She would spend days on the phone with people, listening, sympathizing, comforting and cajoling – she was a natural empath. And she was of course, super-organised, whether it was sending Grace home with clean dog towels, or organizing her own funeral and its aftermath. She left strict instructions that Phil was to continue having a cleaner, began organizing this celebration service herself and her paperwork had been sorted into folders. These papers were interspersed with loving notes for Phil and Lucy to find on her passing, which says everything you need to know about Frankie – always thinking of others.

Lucy found this quote from Winnie the Pooh on Frankie's iPad: *"If ever there is a tomorrow when we're not together there is something you must always remember... You are braver than you believe. Stronger than you seem and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is even if we are apart, I'll always be with you."*