

A celebration of life Jenny Baker

11.20am Thursday 6th June 2019 at Chester Crematorium

28th July 1945 – 26th May 2019

a personal goodbye

Humanist *Ceremonies*

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Jenny was born on the 28th July 1945 in Bootle, Liverpool, where she lived with her Mum Jean, Dad, Harold and sister Val. Her mum Jean, had a huge influence on Jenny's life, she owned a haberdashery shop on the Dock Road in Liverpool, and of course, just after the war, times in Liverpool were hard, but Jean was a strong self-sufficient woman and Jenny learnt a lot from her. Jenny became a celebrant in 2012. This was because she felt her own mother's funeral was pretty abysmal, and didn't pay tribute in the way Jenny felt she deserved.

Jenny was very close to her sister Val until she died four years ago. Val played an important part in Jenny's life, supporting her and the family throughout, taking the kids on holiday when they were young, and sharing lots of amazing holidays with Frank and Val's husband, Mike especially to Sitges, near Barcelona to visit long-standing friends, Pili and Carlos.

Throughout her life Jenny suffered with eczema, though many people wouldn't have been aware of that, she never complained. But in her early life she was prescribed the wrong treatment for this, which culminated in her missing a whole year of schooling, she had a tutor once a week, and according to her, spent the rest of the time roller-skating! Yet despite this, she managed to pass her eleven plus and go to the grammar school.

On leaving school she got a job at the same insurance company her dad worked for, based in the 'Liver Building', and on her lunch breaks she would nip off to the 'Cavern' and watch the bands, amongst whom of course were 'The Beatles', and she became a lifelong fan. Everyone who knows her, knows how much she adored John Lennon.

At 18 she got a job as an au pair in France, looking after four young children, at the Christmas along with a friend from the West Indies, they hitched hiked their way back to Liverpool for the holidays.

After about 12 months as an au pair, Jenny made her way back to the UK. Here she met and married Greg, and they had three children, Samantha, Lucie and Adam. They lived on the 'Highclere Estate', better known now as 'Downton Abbey', Jenny wasn't happy there, she described it later as 'like living in Maoist China'.

After a move to Cheshire, she and Greg split up. Life was hard, as was the case in those days, Jenny had to go to court to agree maintenance for her and the children. The magistrates decided she wasn't entitled to much in the way of maintenance, so money was tight, however, the experience did drive her to become a magistrate later in life, knowing she could create a fairer experience for those going through the judicial system.

The one thing of monetary value she did manage to get from the marriage was an heirloom of grandfather clock, which Jenny promptly sold to pay off debts, buy 3 duffle coats, 3 pairs of wellies for the children to wade their way through the mud of the farm at the tied cottage where they were rehomed, and buy a ton of coal to heat the place during the winter.

This was a tough time for Jenny, she pulled on all she had learnt from her own mother, making clothes for the children, doing a number of jobs to make ends meet, and making the house a home. Jenny made it all seem so easy and such fun for the children growing up, it wasn't until later in life they realised how tough things really were.

Jenny and the three children got a council house in Waverton which was where she met Frank. As single parents they both had a lot in common and got to know each other quite well before their first date, which quickly led to marriage. What Frank didn't tell you in his tribute is that their hasty marriage did send a lot of tongues wagging amongst the neighbours, even Sam had to be reassured that her mum wasn't expecting a baby.

In the mid-1980s, Jenny and Frank bought a house in Eggbridge Lane in Waverton. Here they spent time together with trips to the cinema, nights out at the theatre, and they also took up ballroom dancing. Jenny had always loved dancing, she had ballet danced from an early age, a love she passed onto her grandchildren. She went to every one of her granddaughters' dance shows and loved every minute of it, particularly when Eve was dancing.

After ten years at Eggbridge Lane, Jenny and Frank moved again, this time to the house in Abbots Grange. Together they made a great team, encouraging the children not to be afraid of doing anything. So as the children grew up, they each left to set off on adventures of their own, working and living abroad on many occasions, knowing that they could always return to the support of Jenny and Frank if things went wrong. Jenny's mantra was we all make mistakes, but never make the same mistake twice.

After training at secretarial college, Jenny got a job at the 'Chester Volunteer Bureau', here she met Harold Tomlins and his wife Selina, they inspired her to join the Labour Party and fight for the underdog, something Jenny did extremely well. On election days, the house at Abbots Grange became the committee rooms for the local Labour Party, Bob Teasdale, who is a corporate chef, would turn up and feed the countless people coming through the door.

But it wasn't only election days Bob turned up to do the cooking, he was also a valuable part of the team hosting fundraising dinners at the house as well as Sam and Nick's wedding breakfast also held in Abbots Grange. Jenny was a good cook in her own right but, all the family remember her first attempt at making a chilli, where she got her teaspoons and tablespoons mixed up!

Eventually Jenny decided to run for office and got elected as a Labour Councillor, and she made a great councillor. Always one to take up the cause where she saw injustice being done, once she got the 'bit between her teeth', there was no stopping her. She even took part in demonstrations, most notably for the NHS in London with Lucie.

Her career also included working for Crossroads, Caring for Carers and the West Cheshire Credit Union. But she was also a very active member of numerous volunteer and charity organisations, too many to mention here, but most notably she was a founder of 'Chester Women's Hostel', the first chairperson of 'Dial House', and in her late 60's, she did a sleep out for 'Chester Aid to the Homeless'. And it wasn't just Jenny that got involved with the charities, she encouraged, mmm, is that the right word...all the children to get involved in one way or another with the voluntary organisations she worked for, they each got roped into doing something. Frank wasn't left out either, even once being roped in to be Father Christmas for a charity event at Grosvenor Garden Centre.

At the same time as being a councillor, Jenny and Frank they set up their business together, 'Cotton Tails', as I said previously, Jenny was always a keen recycler, Jo remembers on one visit Jenny made to London, she was raiding the bin, getting out and washing all the tins, and all the children remember her flattening down the boxes of cereals etc.

Their business provided a nappy laundry service for parents, it was a real alternative to disposable nappies and between them Jenny and Frank probably diverted more than a million disposable nappies from landfill.

Amazingly, Jenny and Frank did find time to enjoy leisure time together, they went on some standout holidays, often to see the children wherever they were working, America to see Lucie and Jo, Australia to see Adam, they travelled to most of the big cities of Europe, and even as far as Peru,

Cambodia and Thailand. They also stayed closer to home though, enjoying the countryside of Britain in their touring caravan and discovering new walks they could undertake often in the company of their good friends, Jill and Gerry.

Jenny also enjoyed gardening, reading and watching 'Strictly Come Dancing', both she and Frank were huge fans, and they took the grandchildren and their friends along to 'Strictly on Tour' and eventually even got tickets to be at a live broadcast of the show.

With such a busy life, it is no surprise that one of the most difficult things she found to overcome during her recent illness was the loss of independence, which she fought strongly against.

And I think the piece of music we are about to hear, just about sums up Jenny's feelings to that.

Extract from Colleague Jan Ferguson's Tribute

'Jenny and I were colleagues who became friends.

When she retired from being a Humanist Funeral Celebrant back in the autumn Jenny gave me permission to write to the Network about her reason for retirement. In that email I said...

Jenny is a fabulous woman: she models humanism and brought humour, compassion, experience and professionalism to her work as a celebrant.

Jenny's response to this...

This is very flattering! I have always thought that my best quality was that I was just your everyday person, nothing special, just someone who rubs along with most people and manages to understand them.

How undervalued those qualities are.'

Her husband Frank's Tribute.

Thanks to all of you who have come to help us celebrate Jenny's life. Jenny, where to start, I suppose to thank Mr Leach the housing officer at the then Chester City Council, for rehousing us both to 'Abbotts Close', in Waverton back in 1974 and 76, where Lucie and Joanne became friends and playmates, and I eventually plucked up enough courage to ask Jenny out in February 1978. Six weeks later we were married, that was just over 41 very happy and enjoyable years ago.

We have taken very different career paths, but did survive working together for 10 years, when we set up the nappy laundry. We had many shared interests but gave each other space for separate ones too.

Jenny was the kindest most considerate person I have ever known, if I ever saw anyone in distress or struggling, or looking lost, by the time I had noticed Jenny would already be there helping.

Her courage and strength since her diagnosis last September was truly remarkable and she was always more concerned about the effect it was having on those dearest to her.

Jenny was a very special person and I have been lucky to have shared much of my life with her. She will be missed by all of us who knew and loved her.

Tributes from Jenny's Children Adam, Sam, Lucie and Jo.

Adam's Tribute

Firstly, thank you to everyone for joining us today as we celebrate the life of my Mum, Jenny. I also thank those who are unable join us but have expressed their condolences over the past 10 days. Mum will be quietly pleased with the turnout, although probably a bit surprised by the numbers to be honest! But I'm not, she was a well loved and respected member in the community which is reflected here today.

There are many words I've heard people use in the last few days to describe my Mum. These words have come from all types of people, from all kinds of backgrounds, who knew her at all stages of her

life. All of these words bear repeating now as I feel this will best capture the feelings we all have for her.

Inspiring – Never one to sit back and watch the world go by, she wanted to be out there spinning it! If there was something she saw was in need of fixing, she'd be up there sorting it out. Mum always strived to improve herself and her abilities, to learn new skills and broaden her understanding of the unknown. The overriding drive behind this was always self-improvement. But importantly, her newly learned skills were always used to help those less able to help themselves or to bring positive changes to the status quo. She was selfless and inspiring

Loving – I'm not sure why I bother buying lottery tickets, I believe I won the lottery when Mum brought me into this world. While our childhoods may have been tough at times, Mum made sure we were happy and loved. We never lacked a re-assuring hug or a one-on-one chat to bring us back on the right path. As an adult, I have been fortunate to watch as she brought this love into the lives of her eight grandchildren whom she adored, and I have learned so much from her as I have developed as a parent.

Decent – Without question, Mum was one of the most decent people I ever met, she treated people with dignity and respect (but only if they had deserved it of course). She would not hesitate if she saw or heard something she found objectionable, I'd think many of us here today would have seen her call out unfair, unjust or unacceptable comments and actions. Her moral compass always pointed in the right direction.

Compassionate - Mum always acknowledged there were others with a heavier load to carry than her and was willing to help out where she could. It could be something as simple as kind words at the right time, or a referral to a support group or offering a hand of friendship to someone in need. She wasn't one to judge others, well, except for the 25 years when she had her Magistrate's hat on...then she did judge others, but fairly!

Funny – Over the years Mum and Frank have surrounded themselves with great friends and I can't begin to count the number of times their stories have had family and friends in stitches, crying with laughter. I have heard this laughter all my life, and I am grateful. Mum had a great sense of humour, she was a Scouser, and they all think they're comedians.

Brave - Mum would try anything and stood in awe of no-one. Despite being absolutely petrified of heights, one of the last trips we had as a family was for champagne at the top of the Shard building in London. The next day we went on the London Eye. I stood in awe of her that day.

Lovely – Everyone uses the word lovely to describe Mum, and that's because she was.

There are so many more words I could reel off but we don't have enough time!

Finally, I'd like to share a story which encapsulates my relationship with Mum perfectly. At the age of eight we went on a family holiday to Italy and stayed in a hotel with a big pool and diving board. Naturally I wanted to dive off the board, the only problem was I couldn't swim. But instead of saying I couldn't dive off the board, Mum swam around the deep end, watched me bellyflop in to the pool, grabbed me by the arm and swam me over to the side. She gave me encouragement, I jumped out, ran around and did it again, and again, and again.

Metaphorically speaking, this continued for the rest of my life. She'd let me do my thing and be there ready to help pull me out if I was out of my depth, without question or judgement. I could ask

for nothing more than the unwavering support of a woman I admire, respect and love dearly. I will miss her.

Sam's

'Sam has spoken in public a lot over recent years, and on a couple of occasions she's spoken about her Mum and how much of an inspiration she is for her. But today, the loss of her Mum is too big for her to articulate in person. So here we have Sam's tribute;

Thinking about Mum, there are two ways I would describe her.

The first is that she was like a lion. She was very devoted to us, her pride, and she was prepared to go to great lengths to make sure we were provided for. Throughout her life, her fierce love of Frank, my brother, sisters and me as well as all her grandchildren has been unconditional and deep. She was the daughter of a fierce deep-hearted woman, Jean Brown, she raised fierce cubs and, because of her, the next generation will also be filled with strong confident young people. We get that from her. We are her tribe.

The other way I will describe Mum is more personal to me.

She is the star by which I set my compass. She is the point from which I have always navigated my life. Everything I have done, I have always talked to her about it. And I have always wanted her approval (even if I didn't always get it!) I have tried to emulate her and to do what she would think was the best thing to do.

Mum would never dream of telling me what to do because she taught us all the importance of trusting our own judgement and relying on our own instincts. Nonetheless, wherever I was and whatever I have done, I have always known that she is there for me completely and will provide safe harbour.

Mum taught me that life can be hard and unfair but that if you take responsibility for your own actions, work hard and love fiercely, it can also be deeply rewarding. Right now, I feel utterly lost without her, but I know that she lives on in me.

I hope I measure up to be half the woman she was.'

Lucie's

'It wasn't until I sat down and tried to write this that I realised how good my mum was at her job. She sat with countless families as they went through what we are going through now. So many of her amazing qualities enabled her to do this job as well as she did – empathy, compassion, kindness, strength. When I look at my sisters and brother I can see those qualities in them too and I hope I have them as well.

She taught us to be so many things, she gave us the tools to go and live happy, busy, successful lives. She never judged us...she was just happy that we were happy.

So many of the things she did in her life were centred around making other people's lives better – helping people to volunteer their time for good causes, providing respite breaks to carers, caring for the environment by providing a cotton nappy service, working with the credit union in Chester to provide safe and affordable loans, sitting as a magistrate and finally working as a humanist funeral celebrant.

She touched a lot of people's lives and she will be very much missed.

Her and Frank had a wonderful life together – they shared the same values, they shared the same interests, they travelled all over the world, they laughed together and they showed us how important it is to support each other.’

I wish you’d been with us for longer but we’ll carry you with us in our hearts Mum.

Jo’s

‘Being the youngest I presume I’m left to last, which means Sam, Lucie and Adam have already pinched the best bits, used the most sentimental words and told the funniest stories (of which there are many!) so I will ditto all that’s been said about Jen because I know if I use the words to describe her as inspirational, kind, funny, full of personality, strong, caring, a great listener, brave, loving.....you will have heard these numerous times already.

I just want to take this opportunity to say “thank you” to Jen. I am so grateful to you for coming into my life, I know I wouldn’t be the person I am today without you and I know you will keep inspiring me to be a better version of myself. I have always looked up to you and valued your advice, what am I going to do without our “putting the world to rights” chats whilst Gav and dad talk football?.....and who will Gav chat to when dad and I fall asleep on the sofa?

I have many amazing memories of Jen. My most recent ones are of her visits to stay with us, a chance to catch up on their latest adventures, days out, trips away, with a glass of wine and lots of laughter, she always saw the good in people and the sunniest side of life. I loved the discussions Jen had with my children and trust they will never forget her magical way of putting people at ease.

A lot of my friends down south never got to meet Jen, which makes me feel sad. Everyone needs a Jen in their life and I’m so glad I met mine.’