

Tony's story.

I was born round the corner from the sound of racket on ball in Wimbledon, right beside the Common. I was packed off to boarding school aged seven and after moving to Horsham, West Sussex aged ten, spent much of my life playing cricket and mucking about in the countryside. Bliss.

At eighteen I took a gap year and travelled from London to what was then Rhodesia, in the back of a truck. What a steep learning curve! We crossed the Atlas Mountains, the Sahara Desert, went through the Central African rainforests and enjoyed the game parks of east Africa. I returned to train as a teacher, determined to go back to Africa. I joined VSO and taught in Ghana for two years, taking holiday time to visit Ouagadougou in Upper Volta and much of Côte d'Ivoire. Despite a serious dose of Malaria I loved the experience and came back to London to begin my career in education in earnest. Six formative years in ILEA covering the Brixton Riots turned a raw young man into an impassioned teacher.

I set up an outdoor education centre on the Welsh border and looked after what were then known as EBD kids though many of them were both victims, and consequently perpetrators of truly horrible crimes. The outdoor life suited them and me.

I got married and had two children. My daughter is currently a mountain guide based in Fort William though she is working as 'landslide watch' above the Rest and Be Thankful at the moment. My son is a weaver on Mull. More of him later.

I moved down to Winchester to teach science and be deputy head (pastoral) in an independent school where I had been a pupil.

I took trips to Scotland every summer for 25 years with 30 or so children and allowed them the chance to climb, kayak and abseil along with learning about survival skills. The course culminated in an 18-hour survival on their own or in groups. They took no food or water. They carried knives, matches and other crucial survival gear, and we picked them up in the morning 'twice' the child we had dropped off the previous day.

I worked on my MA through the Open University during this period.

Life was bliss. But then it was to take a very different turn. I watched my father die from cancer that had begun in his prostate and his doctors told me that there could be a family trait.... How right they were. The warnings had made me have P.S.A. tests so I had a chance to respond to a sudden increase in readings. After the rectal exams and MRI I was diagnosed and in turmoil. But my father had, in dying, saved my life.

I was offered the hormone/radiation treatment route or surgery and opted for the latter. Apart from the temporary catheter and initially waking up in a ward full of other cancer patients, I went home immediately and recovered rapidly, looked after by my wonderful daughter. I swam very gently every day and found that I was surprisingly resilient.

Minds play a strange trick on you when the word 'cancer' is mentioned and I got divorced, left the teaching profession (my great love) and bought a guest house on Mull which I had plans to use as an outdoor centre. The parents and staff at the Winchester school gave me Fin, my black Labrador, as a leaving present.

My son and his partner came up with me and we gloried in the beauty of the rugged West coast and made ourselves a living. Three and a half years ago he heard there was a vacancy for an apprentice at the next-door weaving mill and since then I have never seen him as happy. He remains there playing music, fishing on the rugged coastline and creating the most beautiful cloth.

I sold up just before the pandemic and moved to Dumfries and Galloway with my new partner Zoe and we are building a passive house near Thornhill where we intend to see our days out. I play a little golf (not very well) and it has been a treat to get that opportunity to meet some friendly folk and bash a few balls. I continue to enjoy the hills of South Scotland with Fin and hope to go skiing again when the pandemic allows. Since the cancer, I have walked and paddled in Patagonia and visited Everest Base Camp, above which my uncle had climbed with Chris Bonnington.

I think it might be safe to say.... life is bliss.... again. Thanks Dad.

I now offer myself and my experiences to other men who find themselves in need of the sort of support I had so little of. I hope to provide support and comfort to whomever and whenever it might be needed.

Thanks for the opportunity.

Tony Francis