

A Personal Reflection from Frank Ritchie

Frank attended Suicide Bereavement UK's 11th International Conference in Manchester on Thursday 22nd September 2022. This is his report and reflection.

I attended a conference a number of years ago, benefitting greatly from the experience in terms of ASK - Attitude, Skill and Knowledge - as I navigate my life after the death of my son Alan. This conference re-charged my bereavement batteries. However, there is always an emotional price to pay by being part of such an event.

Many of the organisations involved are well known to the SBS community. I will share my personal observations and reflections of before, during and after the event.

I spent most of Monday 19th watching the funeral of my beloved Queen, lost in grief and raw emotion, as the day progressed. My wife, Maureen and I had been most fortunate to have been invited to a Garden Party at Hollyrod Palace in 2019. This had come about as a result of my mental health and suicide prevention campaigning. I and many others are grieving for our beautiful Queen.

Still fragile and fearing the problems of train travel by Trans-Pennine, on Wednesday morning I found myself at Lockerbie Railway Station, where Alan had died. Not a good emotional start to the day.

The journey to Manchester was uneventful, but I was drawn to an article concerning the opening of the inquest into the death by suicide of Molly Russell. Her father, Ian and family have been campaigning for better internet safety. The Online Harms Bill is in progress and all are urged to engage with politicians with our views on this matter. As a 72 year old, and not on Facebook, the only bullying I have encountered personally was solved by my 14 years enjoying training in Shotokan Karate. Consequently, my confidence and self-esteem have kept very high, maybe even too high for some.

What I cannot understand is that I, and my children, endured for 18 years an emotionally abusive marriage, which I could never resolve, consequently ending in divorce. I have paid a high price. My son, Alan has paid the ultimate price. I have not been in contact with my daughter or grandchildren for 8 months. I am still searching for a solution. Perhaps the conference could help.

On the train, when I opened my newspaper, I noted the oft repeated messages over the tannoy system by British Transport Police inviting travellers to report if they had observed anything unusual:

“SEE IT/ SAY IT / SORT IT !”

Arriving at Manchester Piccadilly Station, I observed Samaritans posters, which read *“ITS OK, NOT TO BE OK!”* The free telephone helpline was clearly advertised: 116123.

I had hoped Maureen would be with me to lend emotional support, but she had been unexpectedly called to help her daughter and family move house to Penrith.

I contemplated contacting Evan Grant of the Cameron Grant Trust or Steve Phillips of Jordan's Legacy/ Baton of Hope, but decided to spend Wednesday evening in the Turks Head pub, who were having an Open Mic evening.

By coincidence, I just happened to have brought “Martin,” my ukulele and a bunch of songs. I

enjoyed the evening and sang “Hey God” by Vince Gill, and “Underneath The Stars,” by Kate Rusby. My conversation with the DJ led to him promising to promote fundraising gigs for mental health charities in the Manchester area.

We agreed that music, in any shape or form, can be such a positive therapy, both for the performer, and the audience. The health warning here is that the previous statement is not 100% guaranteed, as I and they have sometimes experienced.

I had a bit of a struggle on the streets of Manchester, as I walked past many homeless and hungry people begging. What a hellish winter will be faced by many more people. How can I help? How can you help?

My mind was drawn to a John Martin song:

*“May you never lay your head down
Without a hand to hold,
May you never have to sleep out
In the cold.”*

Thursday dawned, and after an excellent bacon roll and coffee breakfast from Greggs, I set up the SBS display table and met up with Amber and Kitty.

I did try on the SBS vest they brought me. However, I now looked like a farmer about to shear sheep, so I have kept it for the Barrow event in October.

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Manchester welcomed all to the conference, and I reflected that all who campaign must engage with national and local politicians to encourage, nae, force them to be involved in issues of mental health and suicide prevention.

Richard McCann of the I CAN Academy, took to the stage as a “Motivational Presenter.” He shared his life story - a story of poverty, deprivation, abuse, crime and drugs as he fought for a better future. His mother had been murdered by The Yorkshire Ripper! He exuded positivity, just what we all needed for the day, and beyond.

John Ruskin wrote,

“What we think and what we say are of little consequence. It is what we DO that is important.”

Of course what we all do has to be an outcome of what we think, then what we talk about, followed by action, however I think I get what Ruskin is trying to say.

I am particularly drawn to fathers who have lost a child, and I have such admiration for my friend Evan Grant of The Cameron Grant Trust. I met and connected with Evan and his wife at the previous conference I attended and, over the years, have distributed many beer mats featuring the charity’s details to pubs and cafes, on my travels.

I introduced myself to Steve Phillips of Jordan's Legacy/ Baton of Hope. I offered my support to the “Baton of Hope Project 2023”. He told me that for various reasons, he was stepping back from a lead role, but would still be involved.

I have always categorised people involved in campaigning as Obsessed, Driven or Motivated. My self protection mental morphene identifies me as Motivated, because I know my mental limitations. I do so admire people in the other categories, but they must look after their vulnerabilities.

At lunch, a volunteer with Samaritans came to my table and we talked. I asked her if her team had many delegates seeking help today. She revealed that no delegates had approached yet, however Samaritans had to engage and help some hotel staff who were not feeling good! They may have been affected by the conference subject, or their own personal issues and taken the opportunity to communicate with a Samaritan.

“When someone you love becomes a memory, the memory becomes a treasure.”

I spent some time at the table organised by an organisation called My Memory Boxes www.mymemoryboxes.co.uk. Their memory boxes bring great comfort to those who are suffering from bereavement and loss. Memory Boxes could be the perfect place where precious mementos can be safely stored and passed down through generations. Check out the song “The Box” sung by Randy Travis.

A charity which I believe SBS members might be interested in is Quinn’s Retreat. www.quinnretreat.org.uk This family lost their 17-year-old daughter to suicide in 2018 and, tragically, their son, Dyllon in 2019. In 2020, Quinn’s Retreat bought their very first static caravan in Barnard Castle to welcome families for breaks. In 2021, they bought their second caravan just outside Appleby called Dyl's Den.

They welcome anyone who has lost a loved one to suicide no matter how long ago, and also anyone suffering with their mental health, to stay at a caravan at no cost to themselves. Geographically, both are conveniently local to Cumbria.

I spoke to the SOBS organiser for the North. He told me that SOBS was happy that suicide bereavement support was well covered in Cumbria by SBS and Every Life Matters.

At the workshop I attended, I met Davina Robertson who founded a charity called “After The Storm.” Parents bereaved by suicide meet online to share their life journeys, comfort and support each other . Perhaps I can find answers and advice to help manage my specific issue with my daughter. I have made contact with Davina’s charity.

For me, the highlight of the day was Angela Samata in conversation with 3 Dads Walking: Mike Palmer, Tim Owen and Andy Airey. Amazing what they have achieved, and the funds they have raised and their continuing involvement. I am looking forward to meeting Andy Airey at the SBS Barrow event in October and I pounced at the chance to ask a question.

“I lost my son Alan to suicide in 2015, and like you, I am a campaigning survivor. Two words exist side by side as I manage my grief... guilt and blame. Do these things affect you, and if they do, how do you manage them?”

All three gave honest and insightful responses with admissions of feelings of guilt and blame to a greater or lesser extent.

Summing up my experience of the day, it was most worthwhile, however, inevitably, a bit of my legendary mental resilience broke away and fell to the floor. I am well known for being able to compartmentalise what is going on in my mind, not lingering too long on any one thought, or thoughts that upset me. The conference experience, on balance, was well worth the emotional investment and cost. Someone once sang “*I Will Survive!*”

I made my way back to the railway station . No trains to Glasgow or Edinburgh via Lockerbie. Advised to get on a train to Carlisle. Just managed to get on the train. Stopped at Preston. No crew

to take it onward. Everybody out, so sorry!!

300 passengers struggling to get on buses. Minibus got me to Carlisle and a kind fellow passenger gave me a lift in his car to Lockerbie. Large whisky and lemonade for supper!

On Friday, I drove down to Penrith to pick up Maureen and went to Booths supermarket for lunch. Got an amazing roll and Cumberland sausage and requested some brown sauce. The young man who brought it to the table was the image of my son Alan.

It is not easy to eat a roll and sausage while weeping in the middle of a supermarket cafe. I so wanted to take his photo, give him a hug and tell him how I loved him and missed him. It would not have been fair to that young man.

We got back to the house, and Maureen and I took my step granddaughter for a walk, to get some fresh air and try to clear my head. Turned right, walked down the hill and by some mysterious coincidence, found myself standing outside John Purdie's house. He was out!
Please do not worry about me, the triggers of the last few days will pass, as they always do.

I must apologise for this personal reflection, as I have missed out some conference key speakers and many of the charity tables I drifted past, having small conversations and filling my bag with pens, wrist bands, water bottles, mobile phone holders, shopping bags, lapel badges, beer mats. I have a bundle of flyers which I will send to Sally for the SBS library and possible inclusion on the website.

Mother Theresa once said

"You cannot do big things. You can only do small things with great love!"

I met people at the conference who are doing big, big things. I will continue doing the small things for as long as I can.

Big hug to all.

Frank