

A tribute to Chris Brien Nee Jones by Estelle Graham–

I picked her up early one Saturday morning in Sept 2017, she was having treatment and we were chatting about what she was having done – she says “I have got a job for you”.

“oh right – what’s that then?”

“ I want you to do my eulogy AND it’s got to be funny”! Gee thanks – there’s a gig – talk about you AND make people laugh at a funeral!! Thanks for that so here goes (and please do laugh at least once)

Chris’s mum and dad, Mary and Donnie were from Liverpool and moved to Warrington when Chris was about 7 with her younger brother Gary. School friend Steph tells me they were known as the Liver Birds of Penketh!

Her mum managed to get them into Stocks Lane school and told me she would jump the school fence to protect her brother from school yard scraps. Maybe this climbing was good practise for the time when she found her mate hairdresser Sue not so well in the loo’s on a night out – ONLY chris would hitch up her skirt and climb OVER the door to sort her out

Chris loved sport (as well as her dad of course) and was devastated when he passed away about 20 years ago – he was the one who took Chris her sporting clubs as a youngster including athletics, where she was a sprinter (Mary’s sure she still holds at least one school girl record from when she was at Penketh High) – the start of her fast and nippy talents which she took on to the netball court.

A hard worker, Chris worked in a variety of commercial or sales jobs. At one point doing 2 jobs to provide a home for her and the apple of her eye – son Phil. As I’ve already said, Netball has been part of chris’s life, since she was a teenager – and this also formed part of her work life. When I first met Chris, she had a great job working for a chap called Alan – she ran the office doing everything from being his PA to paying the bills – she also had 2 desks One for work and one for netball. Business to the left AND fixtures to the right!

Chris was competitive – all of us know that and I am not just talking about netball. She was the ultimate competitive mum! She took Phil to Karate – and ended up staying and got a brown belt! At netball anyone who couldn’t do a press up, she’d be down on all 4’s showing us all how it should be done!

In Suffolk Close, the kids would be playing footy in the street, Chris would join in and before you know it, everyone’s on the field, jumpers for goals post !

Chris had a unique relationship with her mum. Making Sunday lunch every week (netball allowing of course). Thursdays she helped with house work and ironing. Including her knickers! I did question this and was told bluntly that you can get more pairs in the drawer if you iron them 1st!

And then there is her ‘amazing’ Phil. He was unavoidably a member of her netball family – she had him do his level 1 coaching with me. They had some good fun and they loved each and had a great mum /son friendship.

She encouraged Phil to be his best, was heard to be giving him a hard time (only to praise him when he went out of the room) She loves how he looks after himself and dresses and thinks he's very handsome (even though she said so herself)!

Just like with her dad, Chris loved watching any sport with Phil – rugby, football, basketball, gymnastics AND she'd be an expert in 10 minutes – “why isn't he pointing his toes, why did he do that pass, what's that referee talking about D*** H***” Insert her favourite word here!

He told me a tale (queue to chuckle) She'd gone to bed one night before Phil ... 15 mins later, he turns the tele off, starts to make his way upstairs only to hear something buzzing!!! He quickly goes back down stairs and puts the TV back on Gives it 10 mins and starts back up – making a little more noise so she can hear him “Night Mum” He thinks she's got to hear me coming up now ... but the buzzing continues he then opens the bathroom door to find she's only gone and left the blumin electric tooth brush on!!!!

Chris loved the sun! Loved her holidays be it with her mum on a cruise or off to Benidorm (making sure her mum had one of those electric scooters to get about), or a weekend away with hairdresser Sue (just slobbering / eating n drinking) or with Chris White chilling in a caravan with the dogs; short breaks with the netball girls - like the trip to Centre Parks with Alloy and her bestie Josie Who tells me the time when her and Chris decided to go and get a bottle of brandy. Off they set to the shop, only to realise they didn't actually know the way back, the snow was coming down, they didn't even know where they were staying. At least they had the brandy they joked – they wouldn't freeze!

They spotted a man in van with a whirly light – managed to persuade him they weren't 2 weirdos, he rang the office and took them back to the chalet Typical Alloy they were already well on their way and didn't realise they were missing!

Then there was the netball weeks away including the time when someone won a trip to Cyprus! Well of course there needed to be a bit of netball so Chris plus a few others played against the armed forces. All had a great week I assume they won!!! Of course – **Chris didn't do loosing!**

And I haven't got time to talk about the county trips and tours – from Alec Barlass weekends in the early 2000's to weekend tours like Scotland, Gibraltar, Wales, Jersey, (the week in Barbados) to name but a few – on the Ireland tour – we let the players pick the coaches names for the back of their hoodies ! Chris got Beyonce! From the times she'd be dancing on the bus with the U16's to “I'm a single lady”!

Talking of 'single lady' and dancing, she spent many a night with her girlfriends in town or on hols, in pubs and clubs. She had very high standards when it came to men. They had to look good, dress well, have a better car than her, a good job and nice big house. Sue told me a tale about a very handsome man chatting her up at the bar. Sue asking “hows it going – he obviously likes you” She replies with “HAVE YOU SEEN THE STATE OF HIS SOCKS”!

Independent – she'd have a go at anything – more than once she'd pull out the washer, take the back off to see if **she** could repair it. My dad went round to help with a radiator leak – he found her on you tube looking for a way to mend to leak (turned out she needed an O ring but she was determined to have a go and wouldn't give in).

Something she passed onto her players

She loved her netball coaching and her coaching pals.

It was actually Emma Pike who asked her nearly 20 years ago if Chris would help her to coach at Cheshire. Chris's gut response what she wouldn't be good enough or confident enough! And look at where she ended up!

Chris even became royalty – well kind of

On a car trip to watch the super league final thunder v surrey storm in London, Chris, Sue and Elaine had an early morning jaunt down the motorway – discussing all things netball of course. **Dame Day** was driving – **Baroness Brien** navigating with poor 'our Antony' Elaine in the back - they had some fun – Cheshire's own answer to the Royale Family. They wanted to go to Café Football for lunch so Chris made the call and the conversation went:

Have you got a table for 3 at around 12.

Sorry but we are fully booked

Oh is Tracey eating there today?

Do you mean Tracey Neville?

Yes Tracey – we are meeting her for the super league final.

Oh let me look again – yes we can find you a spot!

Chris chuckled all the way there – with tongue in cheek, only she could get away with “ do you know who I am” – Dame Day said their road trips were the best.

If you didn't see Chris in the audience at a Thunder or an England match, she'd certainly heard her, usually making comment about an umpiring decision. At this match we ALL heard her shout “ UMPIRE – YOU SHOULD HAVE GONE TO SPEC SAVERS” from the VIP seats yes it was live TV!

Phil tells me she'd be out of her seat at home, shouting at the tele – even when it wasn't live!

And then there's her players – I worked out she must have had a hand in approx. 2000 players in the last 20 years. Chris was a tough coach – she gave her best and expected 110% out of every player at training as well as when on court. She used to say put your hand up if you want to wear an England dress – that's what she wanted for all her girls. Any messing – well she didn't put up with any messing! Drop balls – well that would be shuttles; bouncing the balls whilst she was talking – well that will be press ups – you know what I'm saying girls ... she took no SH..... (S. H . 1 . T)

She inspired – with the exception of this match she didn't win (her words) – she gave girls confidence in their abilities that spilled over into their Life – like when she asked the girls at the start of the season why they were at county she got the answers about mum plays, play at school etc, then one girl said how she was being bullied at school and her mum took her to the local club to give her some confidence. Chris said NOW **THAT'S A GOOD REASON TO PLAY NETBALL – WE'LL ALL**

HELP YOU BEAT THE BULLIES. And that girl has grown not only on court – started playing for an adult team at 16 – FULL of CONFIDENCE!

Another player was buzzing to her mum after last year’s tour to IOM – the tour where she thought it would be a good idea to see how many cheshire players we could get into a bus stop – ANSWER 30 PLUS ONE SMALL COACH CALLED CHRIS IN THE MIDDLE!

The mum told me her daughter is holding close to her heart one of the last things Chris said to her “Megan you played like Serena Guthrie, with those circle edge drives”

And as a volunteer, Chris received quite few awards over the years and recently was presented with the Cheshire Netball Chris Brien inspirational award - quite apt I think you’ll agree – as well as the England Netball Rose award for her contribution to netball. She did a speech where she thanked thunder for allowing her to pick player of the match although slightly disappointed she didn’t get a VIP seat in the MEN Arena! But she also said that it is her NETBALL Family who have always been there for her in times of need – making friends for life, team mates supporting each in defence as well as attack, she’ll be with us all in her own special way. Our little mate.

So to finish a few words from **Chris’s down stairs loo – it’s a picture on her wall**

A Little Hug

Whenever you are feeling sad

And things aren't going right

And your usual happy smile

Has slipped out of sight

Here’s a little hug from me

If I cannot be there

Because I want you to know

Just how much I care

