

The 21st annual TCF Scottish Gathering took place over the weekend of 3rd to 5th May 2019 in the magnificent setting, once more, of the *Murrayshall Country House Hotel*. Despite the fact it was a Bank Holiday weekend, the weather was very kind to us accentuating the glorious views over the Perthshire countryside. The theme this year was '**A New Path**'.

We welcomed everyone with a warming refreshments accompanied by delicious homemade gingerbread courtesy of Marion, one of our Committee members. Once everyone had freshened up and found their bearings and rooms & suites, there was a chance for first timers and the newly bereaved to come together for an hour's meeting to share their stories and/or their natural trepidation for the weekend ahead. The meeting was expertly guided by three Committee members/volunteers and they were also on hand to guide them to tables when the time came for dinner.

Clare Lechner, in her first year as Chairperson, warmly welcomed everyone to the Gathering paying particular attention to first timers and the newly bereaved as well as pre-warning everyone of how much a bereavement weekend can be emotionally draining so to try and practice self care in the days and weeks following the Gathering.

The following day, after a delicious breakfast, everyone congregated in the main function suite to listen to our Keynote Speaker, Michael Angus, a bereaved father of Christopher who was 6 years old. Michael was a natural speaker as his profession is as a lecturer and he expertly talked about his journey and the paths he has been on which have helped him cope with his grief. He has raised thousands of pounds for the Glasgow Children's Hospital through getting involved in trekking and has tackled the Rockies, Arctic, Great Wall of China and Hadrian's Wall, to name just a few. One feedback form just simply said 'Inspirational Speaker'.

We had the usual mix of discussion groups in the morning and early afternoon sessions catering to various needs in and topics. Also, in the shop area where we had numerous TCF leaflets as well as flyers for the 50th, we had a round table and chairs where people used to gather and just chat as there were always people around. Running alongside everything else, we had our excellent therapist, Ann Morrison, who offered massages and reflexology sessions throughout the day and donated all the proceeds raised back to TCF.

In the afternoon, a coach arrived to take us to our unique Memorial Garden in Perth where we once again planted a tree, this time a Snake Bark Acer Maple alongside a newly engraved stone and Gina Claye, a long time TCF Trustee, who had made the trip from London to especially be with us for the weekend, kindly said a few words and dedicated the tree in this special 50th Anniversary year.

In the evening, after a delicious 4 course meal, the TCF cake was cut by Pat, a first timer who already wants to start up a new group in her area as well as our usual light hearted raffle, which even the hotel staff enthusiastically got involved in, and the figure raised at the end of the night was an amazing £537!

The mood changed somewhat the following day, as it always does, for the Sunday Candle Lighting & Memorial Service, always a very poignant and emotional part of any Gathering. The Service was expertly led by Mark Evans, Head of Spiritual Care & Bereavement for NHS Fife, and this year we invited people to say their child/loved one's names into a microphone after they had lit their candle, rather than reading the names out, and received very positive feedback for doing this.

Thereafter there was another discussion group, musical memories, comfort from words & music and a very popular craft session suggested and led by Val, a Committee member, to do with painting on a pebble, which went down very well.

All too soon, the Closing Ceremony was upon us and Gina Claye gave everyone a history lesson of how TCF started and what events were planned in this special 50th Anniversary year as well as enthusiastically reciting a number of her poems. Thereafter, Clare delivered her final speech and thanked her Committee (& Hugh) for all their hard work running up to and over the Gathering weekend. After a filling lunch of comfort food, people started to drift away to catch trains or to drive home and the Committee were able to sit down a few hours later, after clearing up, to read some of the comments in the evaluation feedback forms.

“Being with friends old & new in a secure environment gives me renewed strength to continue my journey”

“You feel not so alone, meeting with other parents and hearing their stories of how their new lives have developed, gives me hope”

“As comforting and safe as ever - a wonderful weekend”

“Thanks to all the Committee for all their efforts - a fabulous, helpful, compassionate beautiful event”

As the Committee prepared to leave we all remarked on how much we had noticed a change in the body language and faces of some of the newly bereaved and how they seemed to be leaving less pained and more supported, as some of them told us themselves. If we have only helped one or two people just starting down this awful path, then we have achieved our goal in helping and being compassionate - as that is what we are all about.