

SCOTTISH GATHERING 2022

REPORT

After an unprecedented break of two years due to the Pandemic, the 24th TCF Scottish Gathering finally got under way, face to face, over the weekend of 6th - 8th May and the fact it drew over 100 attendees showed just how much it had been missed and was still very much needed.

It was a welcome return to the Stirling Court Hotel, the venue for many a Gathering over the years, located within the beautiful grounds of the University campus and in the shadow of the famous Wallace Monument.

The theme this year was '***Forever Anchored In Our Hearts***', a reference to the fact that our anchors have held us in place when the worst possible storm has hit and the unbreakable chains we will always have to our loved ones.

Everyone started to arrive around 4pm on the Friday and, once registration and Welcome Packs had been distributed, a welcome cup of tea or coffee awaited in the *Silverglen* and that first chance to meet the Committee and fellow bereaved attendees. Once everyone had freshened up and found their bearings and rooms, there was a chance for first timers and the newly bereaved to come together for an hour's meeting to share their stories. As we had approximately 55 newly bereaved sadly attending this year, we held two separate meetings to accommodate everyone and two Committee members in each room did their best to alleviate any concerns or trepidation anyone had for the weekend ahead.

At dinner, once everyone was seated, Clare Lechner, the Chairperson welcomed everyone formally to the Gathering and to Scotland itself as a large number of attendees had made the long journey up from England and Wales. Clare talked about the isolation and loneliness of grief, especially felt during the Pandemic knowing a number in the room had lost loved ones during that period. A delicious meal thereafter was had and we retired either to the lounge to continue new friendships, or to be a listening ear or to our rooms with the anticipation of sleep and what the weekend ahead had in store.

The following day, after a yoga session for some and breakfast for others, we gathered in the main function suit (the Blair Atholl) to listen to our Keynote Speaker, Barbara Douglas, a semi retired psychotherapist, bereaved mum to Andy and friend and attendee of many a past Gathering. Barbara talked about grief and its association with trauma through a very powerful and informative powerpoint. Barbara also talked about there being different ways to make sense of trauma and ran through some techniques, such as breathing exercises, which might help people cope.

After refreshments, we had the usual mix of discussion groups in the morning and early afternoon sessions, catering specifically to the needs and demographics of this year's attendees and we were very grateful to Carolyn Brice and several other volunteers who helped co-facilitate these groups alongside Committee members.

In the afternoon, a coach trip was laid on to make the 45 minute drive up to Perth and to our unique memorial garden at Riverside Gardens. John Summers and his *Beautiful Perth* team of volunteers, who expertly tend our garden throughout the year, had kindly sourced a new sculpture, which was unveiled after a few appropriate words from Carolyn. There was also the chance to tie hearts and butterflies onto our memorial tree as well as a welcome cup of tea and tray bakes generously laid on by John and his volunteers provided by a local baker/café.

Meanwhile, back at the Stirling Court, a very useful session was laid on by Iona Goldie, a family celebrant, entitled '*Reflecting on our Loss*' exploring our loss and changes, as grief knows no time constraints and can often surprise us as we least expect it. She was assisted by Sharryn McKelvie, a valuable Committee member and together they created a unique interactive session.

In the evening, before a delicious 4 course meal, the TCF cake which was beautifully made by Lesley Plenderleith with two tiers, was cut by Dorothy & Con Kelly, generous donators to the Scottish Gathering. A real highlight of any Gathering Saturday night, due to its light hearted nature, is the raffle expertly handled by Gary Durham and assisted by Karen Meldrum our newest Committee member. On the night an amazing £617 was raised.

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 Suzie Stark, a retired hospice chaplain, who in fact joined us for the whole weekend to offer what experience and counselling she could as an extra listening ear. Suzie had organised for a friend of her's Janette Bain, to play the Clarach (a traditional Scottish harp and in fact Scotland's oldest national instrument) and its sweet but haunting tones made the hairs on the back of our necks stand up. Suzie sensitively led the service which included everyone being able to come up and light a candle for their loved ones after which Suzie read out the names of all our loved ones, so sadly missed.

A much lighter interactive Singalong session thereafter, was led by Sharryn whilst in another room, Val led a Pebble Painting craft activity allowing pebbles to be decorated using paints or pens in memory of our loved ones. The third activity on offer was a session entitled 'Grief Café' led by Hugh & Mandy giving people a chance to share happy memories or stories about their loved ones using a selection of prompt cards with different questions on them.

All too soon, the Closing Ceremony was upon us with Clare giving her final speech, Sharryn taking care of all the housekeeping notices and thank yous to all involved in making the weekend run so smoothly. There was a playing of '*You'll Never Walk Alone*', the song chosen at the Singalong session earlier as the most popular to be played again. Finally, Maureen read the poem '*Strangers Become Friends*' before we parted, a very fitting choice to end with.

After a wonderful buffet lunch, many people started to depart we hope with renewed optimism to know they are not alone and, for others, took part in Linda Paterson's *Walk of Hope* by walking around the loch on the campus two times (roughly 5km) and all monies raised, once totalled up, will be divided between TCF & The Scottish Gathering to enable the incredible work done by both to continue.

Our children, grandchildren and siblings will ALWAYS BE ANCHORED TO OUR HEARTS as we unfortunately move ahead without them but having these TCF support weekends & Gatherings helps us to support each other on what can be a very lonely road otherwise.