

THE THALIDOMIDE MEMORIAL – TO REMEMBER IS TO CARE - 30.06.16

On 7th July 2009, three friends came together with a resolve to establish a permanent and lasting memorial to honour those who had been affected, and touched by the thalidomide tragedy.

For years, there has been a general acceptance that major events - natural, man-made or through acts of terrorism, are marked in a significant and worthy way; and we felt this should be the case with thalidomide.

As a group, we Thalidomiders, have been protagonists for so many changes in society for over the last 56 years. Legislation has been changed; and there has been a dramatic shift in attitudes towards disabled people. The days of disabled children being left at home were swept away when proud families took their thalidomide children everywhere. Pity and sympathy were not sought ... We asked for nothing more than respect. Through our determination, the lives of other disabled people - whether disabled at birth, through illness, accident or following active service as a member of the armed forces - has been made easier. No longer are obviously disabled people shunned by the public. Thanks to our resilience, disabled people are far more proactive in making contributions to business, public life, offering service to their communities, or just being a valued member of the city, town or village where they live.

When we started the memorial project, we had no idea how long it would take, how many hurdles we would have to overcome, and how much work was involved in such a major undertaking. However, one thing was paramount. This memorial had to transcend all social, religious and cultural barriers, and its eventual location should be accessible to all.

Shortly after the our decision on the 7th July 2009, a petition was launched on the Downing Street website. But, as we know from last week, the life of the Prime Minister can be a fickle one – and so it was, in light of the 2010 general election, the electronic petition was closed.

A paper petition followed, which garnered support from all corners of the country. Our file of papers grew with each month that past and submission documents were written, prepared, revised, re-written and sent to those we felt would appreciate the importance of our project.

Our submissions were lodged with the “powers-that-be” only to be politely acknowledged, but then, doubtless filed away. During the early days of the project, we were fortunate enough to speak with the Deputy Mayor of London, who together with the then Mayor of London, felt the proposal an interesting one but, at the end of the day, offered no tangible support in terms of locating the memorial.

However, we have received support from many eminent people. Parliamentary and regional support has buoyed our aims. I am pleased to say that support came from all sides of the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Well respected members of the legal, academic and commercial worlds also supported us.

We were honoured that the late Lord Jack Ashley of Stoke, and the late Lord Morris of Manchester gave their support to our cause. We are delighted therefore, that Lady Morris and her daughter are able to join us this afternoon, to help mark the end of this long journey.

From inception, the memorial had always been intended to be a dignified form of remembrance, Marking the lives and achievements of Thalidomide impaired people; Remembering Thalidomiders, parents and loved ones who have sadly left us; and to honour those who worked so tirelessly to secure justice for the people touched by this tragedy.

We were resolute that the resultant memorial had to embrace the manner in which Thalidomide impaired people generally conduct themselves – with quiet dignity.

As time progressed, it became clear that still, within the "corridors of powers", there was a reluctance to acknowledge the terrible effects of the thalidomide story, but we remained undaunted in our objective.

We continued to work with many officials, at regional and local level, and the outcome was an agreement to site the memorial in Cardiff.

During the early part of this year, as a consequence of the sympathetic writing of Heidi Thomas McGann, Writer and Executive Producer of the BBC Series "Call the Midwife" our friends in the Thalidomide Society, were able to establish contact with some of the "lost" members of our "thalidomide family". These families were some, of the many countless families, who had lost their children at a very young age. It had always been our intention to recognise those of our number who did not survive to live a full and active life - and we are pleased welcome one such family here today, To you I simply say - your little angel is as much part of our heritage as those of us who remain today.

During the course of the last seven years, we have seen two general elections, a seismic change to how the United Kingdom will be governed in

the future, and, it would be fair to say, that sometimes, the challenge of establishing this memorial has been almost overpowering.

However 2016 has seen our dream become a reality. But we must not let our resolve rest here. We must ensure the memorial is kept in the focus of attention. And this will happen through the public being made aware of the existence of this exceptional memorial of remembrance. On the reverse of your Order of Ceremony, you will find details of the Thalidomide Memorial website, which has been established in tandem with this ground based memorial, to take its existence to a wider global audience. If you can, please spend a little time to browse the site, and leave a tribute to a friend, family member or loved one. Make your thoughts and feelings count as we ask you to help preserve the memory of our unique group.

The thalidomide family is a strong and diverse family. Throughout the years, our friendships have been tested through times of happiness and sadness. In acknowledging the difficult road that we have so far endured, and looking towards the future, one thing is certain ...

... Fate has brought us together, and fate will bind us together for many years to come.

We are, and always will be, friends for a reason – and friends for life.