The Princess and the PWA

Lee Davy King remembers tea with Diana

November 1, 1997 By Dominic Hamilton-Little

The tragic death of Diana, Princess of Wales, engendered a monumental outpouring of grief that merely confirmed how she had indeed become “Queen of People’s Hearts.” Long adored by the masses for her common touch, in 1987 she became the first member of Britain’s royal family to shake hands with a PWA. Photos of her genuine acts of compassion redefined public attitudes toward AIDS by showing people around the world that it could not be communicated via casual contact. Diana was a patron of the London Lighthouse where she frequently visited patients and bolstered morale among volunteers and care workers. Lee Davy King, a volunteer and former patient there, received a visit from the princess while bedridden with pneumonia.

Dominic: When did Diana visit you?

Lee: About two years ago but I’d seen her since.

Did you know she would be visiting?

Oh no. She never said, “I’m coming.” She’d stop by, usually on weekends, to say hello. Princess Margaret [Queen Elizabeth II’s sister] does the same. And Diana just talked to everyone—the nurses, volunteers, patients.

What did you talk about?

She asked me how I was doing. At the time I’d just broken up with my lover, and she said she knew what I was going through. We had a bit of giggle and she said, “Oh, I know that feeling!”

Did you offer her any advice on her martial problems?

Well, I was feeling rather fragile, but I did whisper to her, “You could do better.” She blushed a little, looked concerned and turned away, and I felt awful. So when she was leaving, I said, “Be happy.” And she smiled.

What was she like?

She was so beautiful close up. A really caring, great lady. No airs or graces. She’d stop by for a chat and a cup of tea. I was really touched by her. I think it’s so nice that they care, what with all the problems they have. And my mum just happened to be there at the time and she was over the moon ’cause she’s a right royalist.

Why did we respond that way to her?

She married the prince, she was so beautiful and we wanted her to be queen. But she was just herself, just a lady. Oh, how do I explain? Lee, explain! She'd look at you and touch you. I mean, I was very feverish and hot, and she put a damp flannel [small cloth] on my face and I felt better. She gave me a great boost. When I said I wished I had a camera, she said, "I wish you did, too." But my memories are there. She was genuinely concerned. Like Sarah Ferguson. They're '90s women. Look at that picture of Diana at Gianni Versace's funeral with her arm around Elton John—she really did care about others.

And you had seen her since?

Oh yeah, often. When I'd bump into her, she'd give me a kiss. One time I saw her, after I was better, when I was staggering past the Lighthouse with four bags of laundry, and it was really hot and I was dripping with sweat—I mean I was soaked—and a friend of mine yelled out of a window: "Lee, Diana's here!" So I ran up to see her and said I just wanted to say hello, and she said she was glad I had. Then she looked at me, all sopping wet, and said, "Have you gone for a swim?" It was such a scream. We would chat and she would laugh with me and say she liked my accent—I'm from the East End, you see.

You must have been devastated when she died.

I'm very, very sad. It was a great shock. I'm very depressed. I remember when she asked me how long I'd been positive, and she held my hand and said that she prayed for everyone to live and that she believed I would. And now she's dead and I feel so cold and so angry. She was a healer. She put her arms around me and I felt better. This English boy is very upset, like everyone in the world. But at least I was one of the lucky ones who did get to meet her.

Now you volunteer at the Lighthouse.

It's such a warm place. I just talk to the people and bring them their meals. I've been positive since I was 16—that's 13 years—so I do understand a bit what people are going through. Sometimes I've been there. I do what I can.

Just like Diana.

Yeah, I supoose.

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