

It was always the James and Cathy Show... now it's just the Cathy Show

The courageous widow of ex-government minister James Brokenshire talks movingly of their very special love and how she is carrying on his fight for better lung cancer awareness



SIDE BY SIDE: On their wedding day in 1991 and, left, Cathy campaigns in James's memory

THE most pressing worries vanish in an instant when life changes irrevocably, as Cathy Brokenshire well knows. The day before her husband James was rushed to hospital, she had been worrying about petrol.

Specifically, how to find some. It was early October last year and a reported national fuel crisis had sparked weeks of panic buying at the pumps. Cathy, wife of the former Northern Ireland Secretary and Conservative MP for Old Bexley and Sidcup, had returned from a day out with their 15-year-old son, her fuel gauge almost on empty.

Arriving at the family home in James's south-east London constituency at 4pm, she learned petrol had arrived in Sidcup. She had no reason to suspect her husband's lung cancer, which had returned nine months earlier, was about to take a turn for the worse.

"He seemed absolutely fine," Cathy says. "He gave me a cup of tea as I walked through the door and I said, 'I'm not going to drink that, I've heard there is petrol so I'll queue up. I'll reheat it later in the microwave'."

When she returned, she and James curled up on the sofa watching TV. She took a photo of him; he looked as youthful as ever.

The next morning – Sunday – James's oxygen levels unexpectedly plummeted and an ambulance took him to nearby Darent Valley Hospital.

On Tuesday evening, he was placed on a ventilator. Two days later, it was switched off after doctors told Cathy he wouldn't recover. He was 53. Before letting go at his bed-

EXCLUSIVE
By Kat Hopps

side, Cathy smothered herself in James's favourite perfume, "hoping he could smell me".

She reflects on their final night together at home and whether she would have changed anything. "Had I known it was my last evening with him?" Her voice falters. "But it was a lovely normal evening so maybe it was the right way."

Before he was placed onto a ventilator, James called her.

"He told me how much he loved me and how much I meant to him, and he thanked me for being in his life," Cathy recalls, her voice cracking with emotion.

"My son was with me and I said to James, 'You need to speak to him. I'm coming now'." As she drove to the hospital, James said his goodbyes over the phone to the couple's two daughters, aged 19 and 16.

Cathy, widowed at 50, remains grateful they had that opportunity.

Cruelly, James developed lung cancer despite having never touched tobacco. He is one of 9,828 people every year – some 28 per cent of cases – who die of lung cancer not caused by smoking.

Now, Cathy has taken up his fight to improve services and change perceptions.

"The guy I fell in love with wanted to make a difference," she explains. "I'm going to help – and I always have throughout the 31 years we

had together." Together with the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, she is calling for a national screening programme.

"James had a debate on the floor of the House of Commons and was the first person to raise lung cancer within Parliament," she says.

Lung cancer is the biggest cancer killer – more people die of it annually than breast, prostate and pancreatic cancer combined – but it remains stigmatised, in part because of a mistaken belief only smokers develop it.

EARLY detection rates do prolong life but referral rates dropped by 75 per cent during the first wave of the pandemic. The delays in treatment caused five-year survival rates to fall by five per cent to 12.3 per cent.

It is hoped a new pilot scheme, launching next month to target at-risk individuals in specific areas, will lead to more people seeking help sooner.

Cathy thinks James's illness could be related to the constant chest infections and burst eardrums he suffered in childhood. Researchers are said to be exploring whether damage to the lungs in early life can cause cancer.

A fundraising page for James has raised more than £73,500 for the foundation so far. "It's lovely for me to raise the money and read the messages but it is all about raising awareness," Cathy says firmly. She urges anyone with a persistent cough, repeat chest infection or breathlessness to visit their doc-



CABINET POST: Cathy knew James would be a success in politics

tor. As we chat, James's boyish face beams at us from photographs around the room. He's centre stage in family shots on a calendar, and Cathy shows me a sweet picture of him as a young boy.

James's clean-cut looks were matched by his honourable character.

He was, unusually, respected by politicians across the political divide.

In 2018, he helped to secure £30million investment for a state-of-the-art cancer cen-

tre at Queen Mary's Hospital, run by Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust.

They looked after him in return when he had chemotherapy. Cathy opens the box of letters and condolence cards she has received since James died.

Covered in printed butterflies, the symbol of change and transformation, it is stuffed with hundreds of messages from James's Parliamentary colleagues and constituents, charities and organisations. The latest one arrived the day before and Cathy passes it across the kitchen table. "It made me cry," she says.

The writer, who knew James well, called him the "most remarkable, steady influence across government" and "one of the kindest people" they had known in Whitehall. Not only was James "unflappable", "funny" and "unfailingly courteous", but he was "a reputational touchstone, epitomising rare leadership and measured counsel in moments of political instability".

"It makes me realise what I've lost," says Cathy. She is stoic but still vulnerable in her grief. "He achieved so much but what else could he have achieved?" she says. "He was still a young guy, he could have done a whole lot more."

James was first diagnosed with lung cancer in January 2018 shortly after coughing up a small amount of blood. The couple were about to visit Cathy's brother in Australia and were told by the consultant to make the most of their family trip. They took that as a bad sign.

"James did a lot of soul-searching that holiday," she says. "He said, 'I'm happy and content with my life. I've got you and the kids. If it all goes wrong, I'm happy.'" James's cancer was con-

firmed on their return. He was still Northern Ireland Secretary with protection officers who drove him everywhere. "We were shell-shocked but couldn't discuss it as we had two strangers in the car with us," she says.

Because of the treatment he needed, James had to resign from the position. A small part of his right lung was removed, but he returned to being an MP and appeared to make a full recovery.

But in December 2020 he coughed up blood again.

DOCTORS confirmed on January 8, his birthday, that his cancer had returned. His whole right lung was removed but by June, the cancer had spread to one of his hips.

The couple stayed positive and James was given radiotherapy and immunotherapy. Did they discuss the future? "We never spoke about the elephant in the room, it was always about the good times," Cathy says.

Throughout his illness, James walked 20,000 steps a day around their large garden. And he and Cathy loved to dance around their kitchen to music. He was known for his good sense of humour so it was apt that laughter helped to send him on his way.

Cathy was asked if she wanted a priest or chaplain to say some words before his ventilator was switched off. "I said, 'Actually, he would like that. I wouldn't have thought of it.'"

She waited with her second daughter who had asked to be present. A priest, a small elderly man in a mask, entered the room. "He looked at me and he looked at James and he said, 'That is your husband isn't it?'" Cathy says, mimicking his incredulous voice.

"It made me laugh. I'm not going to be standing next to somebody else's husband? He said, 'He looks ever so young', and I thought, 'Does that mean I look like an old hag then?'" She and her daughter had a good giggle about it. She knows James would have laughed too.

She misses him terribly. "We were absolute soulmates – we supported and did everything for each other," she says.

"It's silly things such as coming in the front door, and there's no one to say 'Hello, how was your day? Can you put the kettle on?'"

They met in a Chigwell pub. She was 20, working in banking, and he was a 23-year-old lawyer with political ambitions. Cathy knew instantly she wanted to marry him. "He charmed me and bowled me over," she says.

They were married eight years later in 1991. The night before, Cathy gave James a drawing of the House of Commons as a wedding gift.

"I said, 'One day I expect you to be in there' – and he made it," she says.

Today it hangs above their staircase. Cathy slotted perfectly into James's world. "I was an extension of him," she says. She ran the household and James's private diary.

When he was delayed in Commons votes or meetings, she met waiting dignitaries or charities. Her duties were always completely voluntary, she stresses.

"We would try and turn it into a date night in the end. We were completely a team," she says. About a week after James's death, a request arrived "quite

high up but from various sources" asking if Cathy would consider standing for her husband's seat.

"I said no because I needed to focus on my kids, and I knew what was involved because of the part I had played," she says. She doesn't intend to change her mind.

James always made time at home despite his frantic schedule.

"All the children got one-on-one time with him and I'm so glad about that in hindsight," she says.

There were trips to Chessington and museums, zip wire rides and dinners out. At home, the family discussed politics at the table.

James "would play devil's advocate", says Cathy. In the lounge are lego constructions of Tower Bridge and the Houses of Parliament he built with the children.

Ironically, Covid proved a godsend in giving the family more time together. Cathy's not sure if earlier treatment would have saved James's life but, in a strange way, the pandemic helped prepare her for the worst.

"In the back of my mind I was thinking if he gets Covid, he could die. I think that's helped me get through things because I've been living with the fear of him potentially dying since the start of the pandemic."

Just as I leave she tells me she is updating her CV.

A new chapter beckons but as to what that may be, she's not yet sure.

"It's been the James and Cathy show, I'm still figuring out what the Cathy show is," she says.

● You can make a dedication or donation to the tribute page of James Brokenshire by visiting jamesbrokenshire.muchloved.com

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Picture: TIM MERRY