

Eulogy for Anna Verrico



When a young person is ripped from this world, it is easy to be shocked. When the young person had beautiful children and a loving family, it is easy to be angry. When the young person was Anna Verrico, it is easy to stand here and talk for a long time about the qualities and characteristics that endeared her to many and which we can all learn from.

Some, perhaps, many who are here today will know Anna mainly from her inspiring fight with cancer over the last 10 weeks. And it is appropriate that we acknowledge the qualities which she displayed over that period in particular – dogged determination. A resilience and an absolute refusal to yield, even when faced with an implacable enemy. A serenity when faced with the phrase ‘terminal’ coupled with an iron will to live every minute with her children. An unquestioning belief in her support structure that all available options would be

pursued, considered and her life prolonged. An unwavering gratitude to the many hundreds of people who took up her cause and tried so hard to find an answer.

Because Anna Verrico loved life. And while the snapshot of the last 10 weeks offered some insight into her character, it does little to explain the woman. The cancer did not define her.

From a young age, Anna was intrepid. Aged 3 months her favourite party trick was to stand on the palm of her father's hand while he lifted her into the air. This epitomised one of her key values – complete faith and trust in her family. As a young girl, her nickname was 'Anna the Frog' – she always bounced around and was full of energy.

Her family were not wealthy, but Anna would always try novel ways to earn her own living. One way she would raise funds to do this was to knock on doors on her street in Lincoln and ask neighbours to let her wash their car. At the time, aged 7 or 8, she could not reach the car tops and so many vehicles had spotless wings and doors but dirty roofs. Anna's favourite childhood memories were of buying a bag of chips with her mum, dad and Stephen and then sharing them out with a loaf of bread from the bakery while sat on a bench on the high street. With Anna, it was not about luxury but about fun and above all being with people you loved.

Her cousin Kadi remembers that when Anna visited, it was like a real life Pocahontas coming to town. Her family from Liverpool shortened it to Pocohoco and remember her little eyes sparkling at having her own pet name. Pocohoco was a dancing Pocahontas. Anna always had a boogie – from the late 80s she avidly drank in MTV and had perfected the moonwalk and bodepop by senior school. Even when camping at her friend Dave's house this year, she wanted to go and have a dance with Lucia when the music began.

As recently as the week before she died, Anna spoke in hushed tones about the one occasion she was allowed to stay with her aunt Jackie and uncle Hammy when she was just 13. That night, when she stayed up watching movies, playing space invaders and drinking full fat Coca Cola remained one of her life highlights. She always reminded Jackie that she had wanted to be her bridesmaid but had been too shy to ask at the time - even up to few weeks before she passed away Jackie had promised to re take her vows so that she could be finally be her bridesmaid when she got better.

Anna was also, quite simply, the most competitive person. In the world. Ever. Although if she stood here now, Anna would have been incredibly moved by her brother Stephen's words which have just been read, she would have also wanted to point out that even though she was much younger, she was better at any of the sports or activities that both participated in. She

had reason to be proud – Lincolnshire All Events champion with a record that has stood for 23 years. She was unnaturally fast at sprinting and could outrun most men over 100 metres. Many of her friends have fondly remembered her arm wrestling with boys and deliberately picking the strongest to take on and, ultimately, beat. Others remember that when fighting, even when little, Anna would punch, not slap. She played to win. Recently speaking about her wedding in 1996, Anna fondly recollects that the end of the vow should have been ‘and we will never, ever play monopoly together’. And adhering to that final vow contributed to Anna and Paul being married for nearly 18 years.

Paul was always perplexed that Anna decided to love him and marry him. His friends always reminded him that Anna was ‘out of his league’. And she was. Way out. Yet boy did meet girl, on 16 July 1995 at the City Ground, Nottingham. Sparks flew. They were married within 11 months and were blissfully happy in a flat above a chemist’s shop on Ashby High Street in Scunthorpe. Anna always referred fondly to those times – in fact, her online password was, for a time, 6pounds, a reference to her weekly food budget for the first 12 months of married life. People talk about ‘Paul and Anna’ rather than Paul or Anna – it was a rare, honest love in which both were utterly absorbed in one another. They worked together, with Anna climbing aluminium ladders to clean windows in Kirton Lindsey and Epworth, lived together and loved ‘together’.

Anna was an ambitious girl. She became an Accountant, not because she liked numbers, but because there was a course at the local college and it fitted with her commitments. She trained her mind to be methodical; and she was both confident and hard working. If Anna believed she was right, she would argue until you agreed. Anna liked loyalty. She found that at Bakkavor, where she spent the majority of her working life, rising up the ranks as she went. She set her sights on qualifying as an accountant – she did that, in her own time, while holding down a full time job. She decided she wanted to become a financial controller; she became a Financial Controller. She realised how unhappy Paul was running a cleaning business – so she became dedicated to encouraging him to do what he wanted. When Paul went to university, Anna regularly attended lectures or legal functions to support her husband. Paul understood that anything less than a first class honours degree would be seen as failure by Anna, so he had no option. That was the kind of person Anna was – she inspired others to be their best.

Anna liked routine. With her children, there were sacrosanct times for lunch, tea, bath, sleep and TV. She despised mess and laziness. She believed that the ‘luckiest people were those who worked hardest’ and toiled tirelessly with any task assigned. She drove fast and loved her car, yet willingly traded it for a ‘tank’ when the children arrived. She did not suffer fools

gladly, but was a true friend to those who took the time to get to know her. If Anna believed that a member of her family was being unfairly treated, she became, as one friend described 'a ferocious hellcat' in defending her own. Despite this ferocity in the face of adversity, her favourite place was the field outside her home, which she could sit and look at and watch the seasons change from the bench on her lawn. Anna seemed quite a complicated character until you understood that her motivation was family, friends and the golden rule of do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

There were some things in this life that Anna loved above all else, alongside her family. The first was food. When you looked at Anna, you'd never believe how much she could put away. Anything with onions and garlic would, literally, make her murmur in anticipation. Tomato and fresh basil on garlic bruschetta was like catnip. Transferring at Bakkavor to the artisan bread factory was literally a dream job. She was a keen chef at home – as the children arrived, she took to Annabel Carmen and insisted that the babies ate organic mush, normally grown from Anna's own allotment, which is just 400 metres from this grave.

Anna loved participating in sports. She enjoyed swimming and tennis but in particular she liked running. As a child, she was a short distance sprinter. As she hit womanhood, she became a distance runner. Shortly after her first bout of chemotherapy, Anna had resolved to raise enough money to sponsor a doctoral student to research triple negative breast cancer at the University of Sheffield. In typical Anna fashion, she had encouraged a dozen friends to join her in a run in Epworth. To prepare for that, Anna entered the Normanby Hall 5k on June 2, just 6 weeks after her last cycle of chemotherapy. She ran the race next to her friend Katie - but as soon as Anna saw the finish line she could not help herself and kicked on for a sprint finish. No-one minded. She was training energetically thereafter – running 10 miles in a little over an hour and half – when the cancer spread to her lungs. Typically defiant, Anna refused to accept a mobility scooter or bike; instead she prevailed on Metres to Miles to organise something she could do, so that she could fulfil what she saw as her obligations. She raised £20,000 for charity by doing this.

Anna was never as fame hungry as her husband, but she was always quietly proud of what she accomplished. She treasured the copy of the Financial Times which announced her qualification. She kept a hardback copy of the anthology of poems which she had contributed to 15 years ago. She loved taking photographs of others but didn't really like being photographer herself, despite being one of the most photogenic people there was.

Anna loved live music. She enjoyed concerts – her musical taste was eclectic, ranging from REM via Counting Crows to Dolly Parton and Eva Cassidy. There is a photo in Alessandro's

room of Anna on Paul's back at Glastonbury in 2008 – looking so alive and full of energy. Anna always found it funny that she was pregnant for some of the 'must see' gigs of her life – she got bored of Bruce Springsteen when pregnant with Lucia at Glastonbury in 2009. She had morning sickness during a U2 concert at Don Valley. She went to sleep at Sheffield Arena when watching Red Hot Chilli Peppers while pregnant with Alessandro in 2012. Anna's favourite artist was a singer called Tom Kimmel; Tom and Anna became friends after meeting at a gig in 2008 and Tom has written a song about Anna which will be played later.

The final thing necessary to mention is travel. Anna had a thirst for new surroundings and cultures. She paired this with both food and sports, enjoying local cuisine in India, Africa, Australia and America alongside mainland Europe. Whenever she was away she would try and combine new adventure with new surroundings – she loved deep sea diving, especially where the water was warm. Her last 'big' dive was in Mexico in 2009, where she faced down a shiver of 10 bull sharks with no cage, a plastic bottle and very regular breathing.

Anna, to Paul, was a Keeper. Not just because she was the only woman in his life. But actually because she kept everything. Going through boxes at home this week, a number of Anna's momentos have appeared. It is a tribute to her life that there were many more saved champagne corks from good times than 'cheer up' cards of commiseration. And the theme of those cards is an inspiring love of husband, family and children.

Of Paul, Anna said

“you are and have been the strong hand, the warm cuddle that makes it all better. The pounced on fellow celebrant and the clung to anxious anticipator. My fellow host and entertainer; my clear head when its all too much. My icebreaker when a smile is all that will crack that moment. The rush that was us for me is always you”

Of Alessandro, aged 8 weeks, she wrote this song

“My little boy has big blue eyes. My little boy fills me with surprise. My little boy has a button nose. My little boy has kissable toes. My little boy is a joy to watch grow. My little boy, Alessandro”

Of Lucia, age 3 “Been trying to explain the flood of Noah's day and it came down to 'the bad people went down the plug hole! I need to come up with a better explanation for the death of the human race!”

When Anna was told that the cancer had spread and her situation was grave, her first thoughts were not for herself. She wrote this

“My darling little girl my heart is filled with pain as I write this for you to read when you are older. I love you. You are the light of my life my Lucia. I only want to hold you and kiss you and tell you everything will be ok.

We have had bad news tonight and I will get poorly not better. This is devastating as I dream of nothing more than my future with you by my side. I see you growing up and doing well. Someone who loves you; I have seen it in my mind and I want to see it for real in my life. For me to support you every step of the way. Thinking that this disease may take that away from me is devastating and I am so sorry that I will not be there when you want me to be.

Every moment has been precious with you. I love you forever and always”

Anna never expected too much from anyone. Even when she was disappointed over the last year by those who she had hoped would stand next to her in the fight and who had instead chosen to distance themselves, there were no heated outbursts. With a quiet acceptance, she instead drew strength from those who willingly gave of themselves and was, in turn, sustained.

Many famous novelists draw a parallel between life and ‘a journey’. Anna hated that phrase. Anna’s life was a hurtling upward trajectory. Anna’s belief was that the cancer was part of the scenery – it was not part of her. She never believed that her time would be arrested so suddenly. In October, when her lung was drained of fluid, she insisted that the surgeon be extra careful so as to ensure she could still dive when she got better. Taken aback that a terminally ill patient would be so vexed, he recapped the physical details, eventually having to agree with Anna that the procedure alone would not stop her pursuing her hobby. Everyone who knew Anna believed that if anyone on the planet could rise out of the adversity which beset her, it was her. We all bought in to that. On Saturday 17 November, she got to lead her football team out on to the pitch and hear the crowd’s approval. At midnight on Tuesday 19 November, her heart was stopped by a blood clot. Anna Verrico died in her husband’s arms. That was how she would have wanted it. She lived her life without fear.

When Anna Verrico was ripped from this world, it was right to be shocked. When Anna Verrico was taken from her beautiful children and a loving family, it was right to be angry. When Anna Verrico, died, the world lost a strong voice, a loving friend, a wonderful daughter, granddaughter and great granddaughter. Paul lost his beautiful bride. Lucia and

Alessandro will forever have to read and be told of the extent of their mother's love, rather than being able to feel her warm embrace.

The Bible says that 'love is as strong as death is, and exclusive devotion is as unyielding as the Grave. Its flames are a blazing fire, the flame of God. Surging waters cannot extinguish love, Nor can rivers wash it away. If a man would offer all the wealth of his house for love, It would be utterly despised.'

Anna loved and was loved. May that love prove stronger than her death.

Poem for Anna Verrico

The words of WH Auden as rewritten to this situation and as read by James Bell at the funeral:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Listen to the sound of the planets moan

Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the white coffin, let the mourners come.

Let the black crows darken the sky overhead
Scribbling in pain the message 'She Is Dead',
Put pink bows round the white necks of the public love,
Let the weather darken as clouds storm above.

Her trusting smile and loving embrace
The way she looked at our children, which lit up her face
Her laughter, her wonder, her vigour, her vim;
All extinguished at Cancer's harsh whim.

Weep for the babies who will not know their mother
Stare at the red roses; cry for husband, parents, brother
Feel our incoherent rage, restless, like thunder;
Scream, shout, tear the ground asunder.

She was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,

My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.