



Demelza's Smile

Demelza
Hospice Care for Children



Now when I look back over the pattern of my life I can see it has all had a purpose and I understand how my experiences were preparing me for my role in the children's hospice movement'. Words spoken by Derek Phillips about the inspiration for a children's hospice in the south-east of England following the death of his beloved only daughter, Demelza, at the age of 24 from a brain tumour. 'She had been feeling unwell for some time but the doctors dismissed her symptoms as 'women's worries' and by the Monday she felt so ill that she checked herself into hospital. There, the doctors realised that something very serious was happening to Demelza but the progress of the disease was so swift that by the Friday she was dead'.

Demelza was married to Bruce and worked at the Acorns children's hospice in Birmingham, assisting in the organising of fund-raising to ensure that the hospice remained financially viable. She threw herself into her job with great commitment and enthusiasm and loved it.

On the day of Demelza's funeral Derek and his wife Jennifer were invited to Acorns hospice for a morning service and it was there that they saw for themselves that the hospice was not a place of sadness and regret but radiated cheerfulness, affection and understanding. Derek and Jennifer were moved and understood more completely the passion of Demelza for her work. On their return journey to Kent and in the following months, Derek and Jennifer continued to speak of the impression the children's hospice had made on them and of how the south-east, where they lived, was in desperate need of such a shelter to assist the terminally ill child to die with dignity and the family to be supported through one of the most important and traumatic events of family life.

The statistics supported them in their growing conviction that they wanted, somehow, to continue Demelza's work curtailed so swiftly and brutally. Of the south-east region's population of 3.5 million, an estimated 500 to 600 families will have a child who is born with, or develops, a life threatening illness. At that time the nearest hospice was at Oxford – too far and uncomfortable to travel with a very sick youngster.

Derek became a 'friend' of Acorns and was the recipient of much valuable and practical advice from the then Chief Executive, Sally Day. Commitment strengthened in Derek's and Jennifer's minds and by Christmas 1993 they had resolved to start a charity to raise money for a children's hospice in the south-east. The Demelza House Children's Hospice was launched and suddenly events began to escalate. Supporters appeared in undreamt of numbers from the local community as well as further afield, businesses, clubs and organisations. Sally Day, with her experience of setting up children's hospices in other parts of the country, acted as consultant. With her assistance, charitable status was achieved in record time and a limited company was formed to take charge of the huge monies that were necessary for this ambitious project. Countess Mountbatten of Burma, who lives locally and had lost her own five year old granddaughter to cancer, became the Patron of the charity.

The building, set within a 6 acre site in rural Bobbing, near Sittingbourne in Kent, was completed and opened in September 1998 offering respite and palliative care to terminally ill children and their families. After 7 years fundraising for Demelza House and raising the awareness of a children's hospice, Derek stepped down as Chairman of the Board of Trustees in January 2001 and was honoured by Countess Mountbatten's invitation to become Founder President. This gave Derek and Jennifer the opportunity to attend together talks and events, giving encouragement and support to the many friends and volunteers who work so tirelessly for Demelza House. Sadly, this was not to last as Jennifer died suddenly and unexpectedly on the 15 August 2001.

Derek still campaigns relentlessly to achieve the vision that was inspired by the loss of Demelza and says, 'I shall never forget Demelza as she lay dying on that last morning. She smiled the most beautiful smile. She was looking past us and I know that her smile was for someone powerful and loving.'

Demelza's life, which could be seen as cut cruelly short, had revealed its purpose and meaning through the actions of all those who now work to contribute to alleviating the suffering of those children, whose lives, too, are destined to be brief.