

Captain Collinson

Hello. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Stephen. I met Richard some 15 years ago and we have been friend's ever since, and Gavin has asked me to capture some moments in that friendship to help pay tribute to Richard today. But I'm conscious that are many people in the room who've known Richard longer and who will have, I'm sure, many stories to tell. I hope that today, we'll all get the chance to swap our favourite anecdotes and remember Richard with love and laughter.

It's hard to capture anyone's character in a brief speech, but perhaps no one more so than Richard. He always seemed to me to be very person that the phrase 'force of nature' was invented for. He was big, brave, loud, kind, brilliant and charming...when he chose to be. I've never seen someone take control of a room of people in quite the way that Richard could. I remember sharing Christmas lunch with him and Gavin and Poppy in 2008 at St Giles House and turning to speak to him, only to see an empty chair and then hear his voice booming in the distance to a table of complete strangers, 'And how are you? Are you having a lovely Christmas? I'm here with my partner Gavin. We're having a wonderful time.' It was a typical Captain Collinson moment.

I first met Richard in 1995. We both completed the volunteer training programme for the Norwich Gay Men's Health Project together. Richard wanted to give something back to his community and help to improve the mental and physical health of gay men. He was a very active and very committed volunteer, becoming a trustee of the organisation and never wavering in his commitment, even when the organisation itself went through rough seas. His fantasy then was to have a float for the Gay Men's Health Project in the Lord Mayor's parade. At the time, such a thing in Norwich seemed unthinkable. I was delighted then that he got to see the first Norwich Pride march in 2009, and in typical Collinson style, didn't simply march or watch, but took to the balcony of the Theatre Royal to have an Evita moment waving his people on.

I always felt braver, bolder and safer with Richard around. It would always be alright. One evening when we stood outside a gay nightclub some men across the road started to abuse us and one of them shouted 'Faggots'. Richard stopped, looked at the offender calmly and boomed across the road, 'Come here you stupid boy and say that.' The 'stupid boy' concerned looked startled and then ran away, unused to someone who fought back.

When I was facing an accommodation crisis and had nowhere to live, it was Richard who stepped forward and offered me a place in his home as his lodger. At the end of the conversation sealing the deal he smiled, leant forward and made one very clear rule: 'If anyone asks, I'm the handsome one.' His favourite story about the time I spent with him was to tell people, 'Yes I said to Stephen you can come and stay with me for a couple of weeks, if you like. He left three years later!' And I was very grateful for those three years.

In the time before Richard knew Gavin, he was always restless, searching for something. He would always dress impeccably, commenting to me that 'You never know. Today could be the day when I meet Mr Right'. And then, one day, he did. And Gavin came into his life. Gavin, you gave Richard the one thing he had lacked: a happy, stable relationship with someone he loved who loved him back. You completed him. And I know he will have felt blessed for the time that you spent in each other's lives and would only want the best for you now that you begin the next chapter of your own life without him. And he would have wanted to thank you for being there with him in those final years as he fought a losing battle with great dignity and humour.

And I couldn't finish without a mention of their wedding day. Daryl and I had the honour of acting as wedding planners for this momentous event, and I remember Richard saying fairly early on that he wanted to 'Arrive in stupendous style, probably by helicopter'. I thought he was joking. But he wasn't...And sure enough they arrived in very conspicuous style by the said helicopter to Daryl and me rushing to serve them both drinks: gin for Richard and a very large pernod for Gavin. It was an amazing day, not least of all as Richard has been given less than a year to live. We had even had to do some contingency planning for him being in a wheelchair and set aside a rest room for him. As it was, he bounded through the day like a playful puppy, never used the rest room once and was dancing into the early hours. And that's how I will choose to remember Richard. He was a good friend to me, an inspiration and something of a hero. I will miss you, but I'm so pleased that I had you in my life.

And finally some words that Gavin has asked me to say on his and Richard's behalf:

'Richard wanted to thank all the nurses and doctors for the help and support that they have given us, and McMillan for being so efficient at getting him all the equipment that he needed at such short notice. Richard also wanted to thank Julia for her tireless support and for always being there. Richard loved all his friends and does not want you to be sad but to celebrate him for who he was. I just wanted to say, I love you Richard with all my heart, always. Past, Present & Future. I will never forget you, my Richard.'