

Fiona's story

'Once upon a time there was a princess called Fiona...' How one setting in Luton dealt with the death of an outstanding, much-loved practitioner. By *Anni McTavish*

As an early years consultant, I'm fortunate to visit lots of different settings. Often, this is for a one-off training session or workshop, but sometimes relationships develop further and I continue to visit as a consultant. One of these settings is Pastures Way Nursery School in Luton, and I have worked closely with the staff team there to develop practice, mentor new practitioners and facilitate cluster meetings.

I was, therefore, very sad to hear the news that one of the team had been off sick and had recently been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. A popular and inspiring woman, Fiona was close friends with many of her colleagues, a parent herself and was held in high regard by the families and children who came to the nursery. Supported by her family and close friends, Fiona went on to fight a brave battle with her illness, but died just after her 44th birthday during the Easter holidays.

While her illness had proved hard for colleagues to bear, news of her death was, inevitably, deeply distressing. Acting head Emma Pobjoy explains, 'One of the things that we found difficult was that because Fiona had been ill for a while, new families who joined the nursery didn't know her, yet we were still dealing with the fact that a key member of staff was away and we were all very worried.'

'Although we knew that she was very ill, her positive attitude, courage and determination meant that the suddenness of her death came as a shock to us all.'

COMING TOGETHER

The timing of Fiona's death meant that the team were suddenly faced with making important decisions about how to respond. 'One of the things we did was to come together the day before term started, so that we could reconnect and support each



Pastures Way Nursery School practitioner Fiona Mayze died at the age of 44

other before welcoming back children and families to the nursery,' continues Ms Pobjoy. 'It gave everyone the chance to talk, cry and share their memories of Fiona if they wanted to.'

'Another decision we made was to give the news of Fiona's death on a beautiful card, which included practical information about her funeral and that the nursery would be closed so that staff could attend.'

'We also asked families to direct their questions about Fiona to three named members of staff, to avoid practitioners having to respond to unexpected questions during their day with the children.'

'We discussed how to talk with the children and felt it was best to keep things simple. We would tell them about Fiona if they asked, and support

their questions with conversations and stories.'

STARTING A NEW TERM

The first week of the new term following Fiona's death was very emotional. Everyone on the team worked hard to keep the nursery running smoothly, and visitors remarked on the commitment and dedication that staff showed to children during this difficult period.

Practitioners who had known Fiona less well were sensitive to the fact that many were experiencing feelings of sadness and loss. Anyone who needed to take some time out to compose themselves could do so. For some, it was also the first time someone they had known quite closely had died. As well as working hard to be

positive with children and parents, the team were dealing with a new, personal experience of grief.

CELEBRATING FIONA'S LIFE

Fiona's family wanted her funeral to be a celebration of her life. The team helped to organise this, cooking and preparing food with her husband Andy, which allowed them to support him, and share stories and fond memories together.

Fiona had also been known as the 'Queen of display'. Anyone who borrowed her staple gun without asking would be in big trouble! So it was very fitting that the team transformed the hall where the party was to take place. Photographs, colourful bunting, fabrics and tulips (her favourite flowers) illustrated Fiona's creativity and made it a wonderful space to celebrate her life.

USING STORY TO SUPPORT SICK CHILDREN

Before her death, Fiona had spoken with her family about how she would like money to be raised in her name in aid of something she felt passionate about. This was always going to be linked to stories and storytelling, and together they chose the charity Readathon.

Readathon provides new books and storyteller visits to children in hospitals across the UK. Over 25,000 new books and 210 storytelling days are donated over the course of a year, bringing the magic of books and stories to over 100,000 seriously ill children and their families. I have wonderful memories of watching Fiona create magic, warmth and laughter with groups of children through telling stories, singing and acting them out.

CREATING FIONA'S GARDEN

Once some time had passed, the nursery began to discuss their ideas about creating a special storytelling garden in Fiona's memory. Staff, children and families helped to raise funds with a school disco and everyone contributed in different ways. Some were able to offer their gardening knowledge; others rolled up their sleeves and did their first bit of pebble mosaic to create a pathway.

Others found plants, log seats or mobiles, and with a lot of hard work, the garden was created in a couple of days. The hunt was also on to source a distinctive and beautiful storytelling chair to take centre stage.



The perfect chair was found at Free Range Designs, a small company based in Wales that creates unique pieces of furniture from recycled, reclaimed and ecologically sound materials. Hand-carved in oak, Paul and Suzanne at Free Range Designs suggested that the nursery might like to have something carved into the backrest, and the team decided on 'Once upon a time there was a princess called Fiona'.

Her colleagues were determined to do Fiona proud. Practitioner and team leader Clare Francis says, 'I wanted to do things that I knew Fiona would be proud of us doing – keeping children the priority, focusing on quality practice, and making a magical, creative learning environment. That's why the story garden is so important. It has Fiona's energy sparkling through it, so it's not only a special place for our babies and children, but also for the adults who spend time reading, telling stories and singing. It's in a part of the garden that she loved, by some trees, which in spring come into blossom.'

'While we were making the garden, we kept stopping, walking away to look at it from a distance, to make sure that it was inviting, that we'd want to go into it. This is what Fiona would have done – her practice was all about creating fascination and intrigue and she loved books and reading. She would love the garden.'

THE GARDEN OPENING

The nursery arranged for their long-time friend and storyteller, Kathryn

The carved oak chair in the story garden

Holt, to come and help them to open the garden. A robin had begun to visit the garden regularly, so the staff had asked her to include this.

Ms Holt began her story with a chant, 'This is a special place, a very special place, a special place for stories', and this helped the children to understand the importance of the garden.

She then told a story about a robin that remained in the garden throughout the winter, even when all the other animals left to hibernate. Engaging all the children and touching the staff team, it included the refrain, 'It may be raining but the sun will always shine again.'

Children, families and Fiona's family attended, and everyone agreed that the garden was a truly special and magical place.

MOVING FORWARD

The team are going to make good use of their new garden. They are already planning an annual fundraising event for Readathon at Easter time near Fiona's birthday. 'We thought we would have an Easter bonnet parade around the storytelling garden, and we'll tell stories and remember Fiona,' says Ms Francis.

This makes a connection from the past into the future. It acknowledges the wonderful stories that Fiona and other practitioners created, and is also about continuing what she would have wanted, for all practitioners to share a love of books and stories with children and their families. Fiona's story continues. ■



MORE INFORMATION

- www.readathon.org
- www.freerangedesigns.co.uk
- www.kathrynholt.com/storytelling.php