Telling my story is often daunting and difficult but I find that it helps with healing and I hope I can give a little light and hope to someone here who may be going through difficult circumstances and you might be encouraged or inspired.

Being in Knock brings back fond memories of my childhood. I was brought up in Scarrif in East Clare. My mother, father, brothers and sister would pack up the car and make sure we had enough sandwiches for the day trip to Knock. While as a child I may have indeed taken my catholic upbringing for granted It was in my later teens as a hoarder in the Presentation Convent in Thurles I began to feel a deeper connection with God. My favourite part of the day was daily mass at 7 am. My old school friends remember my enthusiasm rushing to the school chapel. My faith at this time began to flourish and I began to appreciate my faith and trust in God.

My journey took me from school to college and then onto a career in banking where I spent many years travelling all over Munster with Bank of Ireland.

I met Anthony in my early twenties and we married a couple of years later in July 1999. I just celebrated our 20 year anniversary sadly with out him. But withe our two sons Tony and Dan we celebrated how we thought best.

Anthony was better known as Axel, a professional rugby player, playing for Munster and Ireland. After a successful playing career filled with many achievement he retired in 2008 and immediately joined the coaching team with Munster Rugby and took the position of Head Coach with the Provence in 2014.

The 16th of October 2016 is a day I will never forget. At home, it was a usual Sunday for me. I went about my normal day with an air of excitement . Anthony was in Paris withe Munster Team. It was the first round of the European Champions Cup, they were due to play Racing Metro in the afternoon. Before every game, the players and coaches meet for a prematch breakfast. Anthony failed to show up to this breakfast which was out of character for him, but it wasn’t until he didn’t show up for line out training that the management and the team became concerned. Unaware of what was going on, back in Ireland at home the children and I were in our usual Sunday morning routine. For evermore, I will never forget what it felt like to hear the news that Anthony had in fact died in his sleep in a hotel room in Paris…..

The moments, hours and days that followed this will be the most devastating and truly heart breaking mements our families would have to face. I never could have imagined the tI would have to prepare and deliver a eulogy for my husband’s funeral mass at 42 years old. I spoke about our family life, about our home being a haven for the important things, Anthony had wonderful values and our home life with our boys was idyllic.

At home in Killaloe, through out our community and farther afield, there was a huge affection for Anthony. He was an ordinary man, He was a big man in a tough game. He always played and coached with heart and passion. He was respected as he went about his business with humility, treating all around him with respect and kindness.

Anthony comported himself in such a way that people around him could relate to him. They had a bond with him. It is fair to say he was an idol to many but nowhere was he more idolised than at home. As a hands-on dad to our children, he took interest in everything they did and was involved in every aspect of their lives despite his huge work load and commitment to rugby. He touched so many lives and leaves a great legacy.

I’m sure many of you here, if not all of you have experienced grief and mine is not greater than any of yours. Loosing Anthony created a void in our lives a=that is simply impossible to full. It is said that grief is difficult because it is the last act of live, where there is a deep grief there was great love. In loosing Anthony I lost my husband, my confidant, my best friend and perhaps the most heartbreaking of all I lost the father of our two little boys. Tony was just 11 and Dan was only 8.

During the darkest days after Anthony’s death I found much comfort in my faith. Im not going to pretend that there were not moments when I was angry at Anthony for dying and angry at God for taking him. But grief is like the ocean, it comes in waves, ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the waters calm and sometimes so overwhelming that staying a float is a struggle. The angry moments are followed by peace and comfort. I always felt God’s presence in many ways, in the support of my family, Anthony’s family ad my wonderful friends. There was always someone at my door and I was not afraid to ask for help. I had two grieving children that needed me to be everything for them.

They say “it takes a village to raise a child”, well I have proven this proverb most certainly applies to a grieving family. There was always a lift to the hurling filed, or the the scout hall, or dinner on a friend’s table This was all God at work.

When Anthony passed away both Tony and Dan were in primary school. The school principal Kieran Corcoran sought help form the Children’s Grief Centre, Limerick. The Centre was set up by Sr. Helen Culhane with the backing and support of her order The Sisters of Mercy, 10 years ago. The Centre provides support for children who are grieving the loss of a parent or sibling but also children who have suffered loss through parental separation. Both my children have used the centre to help them navigate through their grief. I myself developed a deep connection with the centre and a great friendship with Sr Helen Culhane which led to my appointment as ambassador for the Centre last year. I believe that ‘you always are where you are meant to be”. Anthony’s death was devastating and my grief has two parts, the first part is the enormous loss and the second is starting to live a new life. The Children’s Grief Centre has played a pivotal role in that journey for me. If Anthony’s death has taught me anything it is that great loss in life is unavoidable but through the support, love and sharing of stories with others, that colossal loss can be faced.

My faith has taught me that in helping others we can really help ourselves. Being Ambassador the the CGC is a role that has given me great focus and joy. Meeting Sr Helen and having the opportunity to give back to the community has been very rewarding.

I believe that God has put all these people in my path. We took great strength form all the support that rallied around us. The gestures of solidarity and support from the people closest to Anthony and our families and from those who we never met, they sent cards, letters and kind words.

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In the days after Antony’s death, our son, Tony, came up with a tribute idea for his dad. He would invite people to attend mass each Sunday form October to Christmas, to pray for their loved ones. So the idea was formed, the Facebook page set up and the idea for #8masses4#\* began to spread. The number 8 holds a special meaning in our household as Anthony wore the number 8 jersey playing for club, Province and country. But that 8 masses tribute reached over 160,000 people over 40 countries worldwide.

We were propped up with support from around the world joining us in prayer. The messages of love and support and the volume of hope was a privilege that we were no more entitled to than anyone else who has lost a loved one but I believe that all of this is God at work, reminding us the he is with us.

In the face of such great loss or adversity it is easy to lose faith and doubt your beliefs, but this comes from a place of deep sorrow. The pain we feel can indeed make us question but I really truly believe we experience God’s work through alll the kindness, through the people that come to our side and simply say “I am sorry for your loss”. I don’t doubt God’s Love.

Before Anthony’s death I could never have imagined being able to come here and speak to you . In the face of awful tragedy I have discovered another possibility in life. His death has opened a door and this may give me the strength to help others and perhaps give others a little hope. This is an unexpected yet comforting outcome. It has been almost three years now since Anthony died. God did not promise us a world without pain or suffering, but he did promise strength for the day, comfort during our sorrow and light along the way and I am grateful for that.

Thank you

Olive Foley