

## Stephen Bicknell

A chain of the stairwell, 18 Aug 2007 at home in London Fields, age 49

Stephen was a church organ expert, known for his classic designs for the wood casing for the pipes and for his encyclopaedic knowledge. He wrote *The History of the English Organ* (1996, Cambridge University Press, still in print) and worked as for organ-builders like Mander and Walker as designer and client product development. He lectured and broadcast on the BBC about organs.



His insecurities and depressions had been modest until, as a gay man in the 1990s in London, a high risk environment, he contracted HIV; the anti-viral medication he was on stopped him from getting AIDS, without which he almost certainly would have died then. Although he was never diagnosed as having bipolar, he certainly had profound depression, but non of the mania associated with bipolar. The trauma of his diagnosis and self medicating through recreational drugs left him with emotional instability, i.e. he was unable to regulate his emotions. He probably had an emotionally unstable personality disorder, which can develop from trauma , although it was not diagnosed.

Steve did meet with professionals a few times, but never felt understood, so did not follow up on offers of help. If you asked him what was wrong he would formulate it as having prepared himself to die (from his HIV diagnosis at a time before medication was available), then when he had lost his regular job, many friends etc. the new wonder drugs came on the scene, offered him life and hope etc. However, the trauma of all he had lost and in being effectively given a terminal diagnosis had left him so scarred emotionally that he was unable to fully engage with life again. In the end he resorted to harder drugs, particularly ketamine and methamphetamine (or crystal meth), which gives huge highs, but the lows are equally marked. This further dis-regulated his already unstable emotional state. This ultimately led to his suicide. He left no note, and on the day he died seemed better than he had for several weeks.

Jon writes "I'm glad his case study will be out there somewhere and may be of help to others, I think Stephen would like that too. I think he was at heart a kind person and although struggled to show it at times did care deeply for others, particularly those who he felt were lost or in trouble of some kind."

Today, the stigma of mental health among men must never be the reason they don't go and get help. "I'm too macho to need help? Getting counseling wouldn't help me anyway?". We have every obligation and reason to redouble our efforts to encourage men to get help and to reduce the appalling suicide rates.

Witness: written by Jon Vanner and Stephen's elder brother Marcus Bicknell who are willing to talk further about this case and about mental health care for men. 07748 111444 – [marcus@bicknell.com](mailto:marcus@bicknell.com) – London area.



*Stephen at his civil ceremony with Jon Vanner in 2006*

## Ed Davis

Tavistock Viaduct, 26 April 2018, near his home, aged 51

Ed was a dearly-loved father and husband, a talented and popular teacher and a colourful and respected member of the Tavistock community. He suffered mental illness for most of his adult life. He was, at times, disarmingly honest about the symptoms of his illness and laughed along with his family and friends that he had Mixed Affective Disorder which spelt M.A.D. However the right help was not there when needed. Once out of the Mental Health system, (which happens all too fast if you are on medication and seemingly OK), a patient, who then experiences problems, needs to be pro-active and seek help themselves. This is often very difficult if you are experiencing the symptoms of poor mental health. You have to realise independently you are unwell and get the help rapidly. Often by the time you do it is far too late... as was the case with Ed.

The speed and the dramatic nature of his death created shock waves not just in his community and his family, but across a much wider community. How could such a successful and well-lived man want to suddenly take his own life? His widow Harriet, also a Performing Arts and English teacher who has worked on improving mental health and self-confidence through Drama for most of her career, was not just shocked but angry. She took to the pulpit of Tavistock Church at Ed's funeral, just a year ago now, and expounded the issues with such conviction, eloquence and... well... ferocity that we in the congregation quaked in our boots until bursting into applause and more tears. Yes, Harriet was angry with Ed for taking his own life and for leaving such misery behind him, and she said so. But she turned that into the argument that men are so susceptible to mental health problems because they don't ask for help. They frequently believe it is somehow their fault and they are to blame for being weak and not fighting it alone. She argued that men do not have a culture of talking openly with each other about these issues, they speak with friends or family around the subject but they don't want to burden them with the really dark thoughts they are having. Often simply admitting they are contemplating suicide – just saying that word - means they face the fact that they are ill which is a first step to alerting family and health workers how serious the problem is, so help can be found, But men are particularly bad at admitting the fact they are contemplating it and particularly good at doing the deed successfully. Harriet vowed to campaign for better communication of the greater dangers facing men in depression and is keen to help improve awareness that getting help is easy and as normal as getting help for any health complaint.

Witness: Ed's widow Harriet Davis née Mott, is willing to talk further about this case and about mental health care for men. 01822 259076 - [edwindavis3@hotmail.com](mailto:edwindavis3@hotmail.com) – Tavistock, Devon

<http://www.tavistock-today.co.uk/article.cfm?id=434635&headline=Inquest%20finds%20teacher%20from%20Tavistock%20took%20his%20own%20life%20after%20stopping%20his%20medication&sectionIs=news&searchyear=2019>

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