

Compassionate Balliol

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My brilliant and astonishing state school northern son (John) spent the last year of his life as a post graduate history student at Balliol College, University of Oxford. In many ways it was a good year, thanks to John's determination and the staff and students at the university who were totally committed to making it so, despite horrible unforeseen circumstances. The media is quick to denigrate Oxford for its elitism. I feel moved, as a parent to tell another story which reflects on the compassion and sensitivity my son received as a valued Balliol student.

Despite gaining a First, and then a distinction at Masters' level, at Queens University Belfast (another fine Russell Group institution), John was amazed to get into Oxford. He was filled with imposter syndrome when he arrived in September 2011, but had achieved a sense of belonging by the time we visited in October. Freshers' week helped, as did activities which threw nervous students together in academic departments and halls of residence and helped them to realise that they all felt nervous and astonished about gaining a place. John did not need a visit from his family a few weeks into term as he had quickly established a network of lovely friends and was busy studying, socialising and settling in to a new identity as a successful and worthwhile person with much to offer to academia and the world. It was a joy to see him walking into Balliol as if he owned the place.

By November 2011, without warning, John was diagnosed with advanced metastasised cancer and his dreams of an Oxford education were potentially shattered. Staff at the university however took the view that John was a Balliol man and he could remain at Balliol as long as possible. Compassion oozed out of the university from all quarters. My main contact was with the Disability Service, specifically Pete Quinn (Head of Service) and Helen Young (Disability Adviser). They didn't make a fuss, were very careful about John's confidentiality and must have been instrumental in the smoothly efficient and totally compassionate approach adopted by the whole institution.

John continued to live in halls and attend classes for most of the year while undergoing chemotherapy. He was supported by academic, medical, disability and student services staff and others who seemed to work together somehow behind the scenes in a joined up and understated way. Helen emailed him regularly without being intrusive. John expressed surprise when the college nurse just turned up when he was sick from chemotherapy or an encouraging letter arrived out of the blue from his academic adviser. His sense of belonging continued even after he interrupted his studies, with a view to returning once the horrible cancer ordeal was over. He was able to return and attend occasional lectures, formal hall and garden parties and to stay in his halls of residence and visit his lovely friends, some of whom even kept him company during long chemotherapy sessions, and at the hospice. Frequent contact with the Chaplain gave John comfort and confidence. His dad remembers

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driving fast from the Churchill Hospital to Balliol for John to attend Doug's lunch which is an important and informal get together for students (of all faiths and none) with the Chaplain (Doug). When John was away from Oxford he received letters, cards, emails and visitors and it was very clear to him that he was still welcome and not forgotten.

John died on 12-12-12 just over a year after his diagnosis, and after a huge amount of gruelling chemotherapy. University staff and students had maintained contact with him throughout his illness and visited him in the hospital and the hospice. His friends even came after he lost consciousness and brought with them messages they had collected for the family.

The night John died the flag flew at half-mast over Balliol (I know this because Pete Quinn took the trouble to text me). The Chaplain held a small service in the chapel for John's friends. We celebrated John's life in Balliol Chapel in February. The Chaplain was clear that he viewed John's memorial service at Balliol as something which was also an important aspect of pastoral care for other students, and needless to say the chapel, the overspill room and Balliol Hall were all packed. Someone had even arranged for the sun to shine. It seemed appropriate that John's body should remain in Oxford and on Christmas eve we buried him in Wolvercote cemetery. Compassion towards us as a family did not end with John's death and we are still receiving messages of support from university staff and students.

John's brief experience at Oxford was not what we expected and we would far rather have been able to celebrate his Civil Partnership in Balliol Chapel. It was, however, astonishing and uplifting. I have worked in higher education for many years and felt privileged to hold the positions of Head of Disability and Well-being Services at the LSE and at Sheffield Hallam, roles in which I have been able to do something useful for students. Oxford set the bar high and LSE exhibited incredible compassion too towards me, as their employee and a parent and towards my son who was baptised by the LSE chaplain in the hospice a week before he died. Queens also stepped up by facilitating John's attendance at his Master's graduation long after the cut-off date and through regular visits from friends and faculty and a wonderful contribution to the memorial service. John's last coherent conversation was with Catherine Clinton, a respected Professor of American History from Queens, who flew over from Belfast to see him in the hospice. Queens have planted a tree in John's name and the History department has created a memorial prize.

The compassion, reassurance and validation John received came from all quarters, as has the support for his family since his death. Staff in the Porter's Lodge, those who provided the catering and technical support for his memorial, the people who helped us to choose John's memorial bench are amongst the many who deserve acknowledgement. Pete and Helen looked after me with great care when I gave a lecture for Oxford DERN at the university soon after John died. It is impossible to think of anyone who was anything other than astonishing.

In Holywell Manor, John's hall of residence, his name has been painted on a notice which identifies which room he had been allocated for this academic year. He will have seen this when he was there in November. Thank you for that remarkable act of kindness which will have given him hope.

John's memorial bench is in Balliol garden. He has a memorial fund at Balliol.
www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/alumni-and.../the-john-beecher-memorial-fund

As a sector we need to think about the way in which we support terminally ill students and this is an area of research I am considering. I am convinced we can all learn from Oxford's example.