

Sally Mays' mum: Her life stopped at 22. I think at 30 she would have been much better

Family's tribute to talented young woman who had so much potential but struggled with mental health

By James Campbell Reporter 05:00, 3 OCT 2022



Sally Mays played badminton for Yorkshire and enjoyed several other sports

Such have been the failings in the care of Sally Mays that she has become synonymous with the trauma mental health problems can inflict. But to those who knew her she was so much more.

Sally may have been just 22 when she passed away, but she packed a great deal into her tragically short life.

In the past week, an eight-year legal battle by her parents, Angela and Andy, to answer the question of why Sally was failed on the afternoon of July 25, 2014, is finally at an end. Sally died at home in Hull that day shortly after she was refused a bed at the Miranda House mental health unit.

Sally took her own life after two nurses from Humber NHS Foundation Trust's crisis team – Paddy McKee and Gemma Pearson – refused to admit her to hospital following a 14-minute assessment, despite her being a suicide risk.

An eight-day inquest in 2015 heard Sally, who had emotionally unstable personality disorder, died from an overdose and mechanical asphyxia. Bridget Dolan KC had successfully

argued at the High Court in December 2021 that a conversation between psychiatrist Dr Kwarme Opoku-Fofie and mental health nurse Laura Elliot represented significant evidence never disclosed at the original hearing, which required the original inquest to be quashed and a new one held.



Angela and Andy Mays have battled for seven years to get answers into their daughter Sally's death

While the new inquest found there was no missed opportunity, and the conversation between Dr Opoku-Fofie and Ms Elliot was largely innocuous, the family are relieved all the information has now come out.

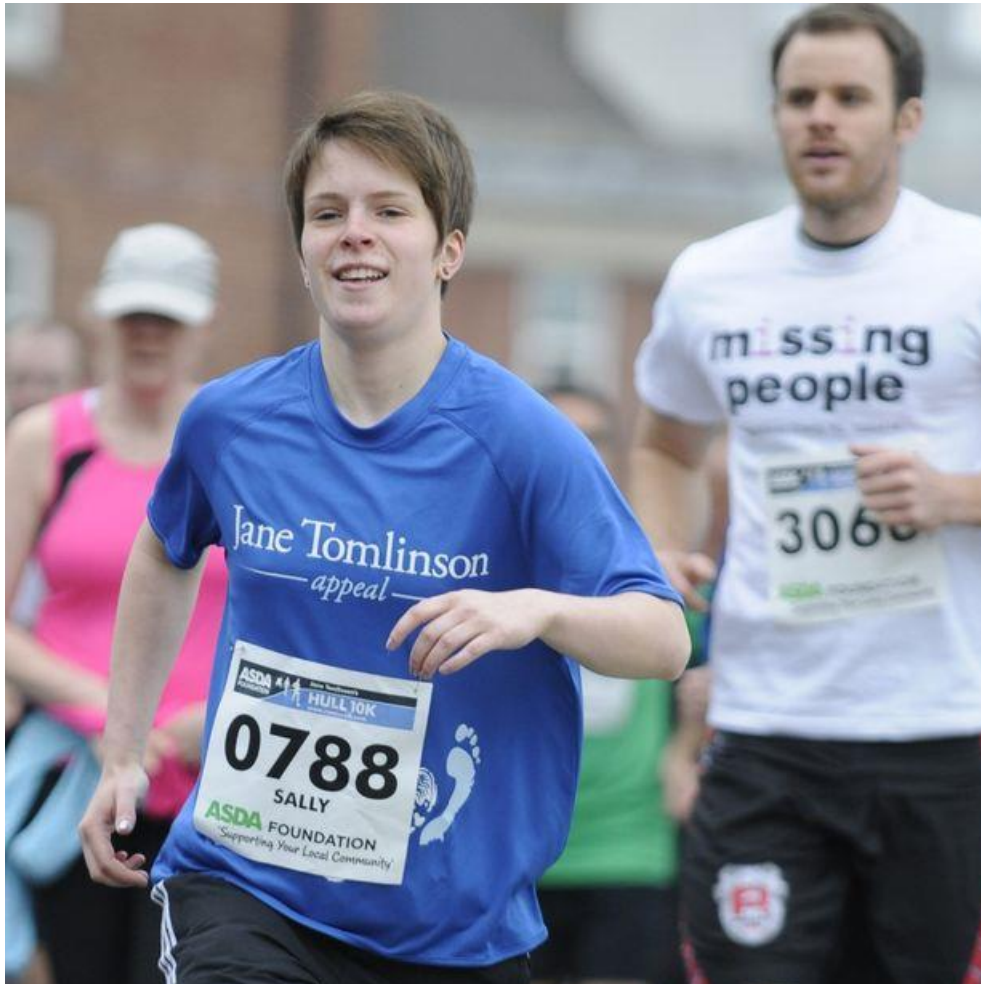
They and Sally's brother Ben can now start to grieve properly and also remember all the happy times with Sally and what a remarkable young woman she was, rather than focus on those heartbreaking final moments.

"We will miss absolutely everything about Sally in minute detail," mum Angela said after the inquest. "She had a particular smile, the sort that lights up a room. She was energetic and we miss her enthusiasm.

"She had a lightning wit, perhaps even acerbic. We often laughed until we cried. We saw things the same way.

"I miss her music. She was an excellent violin player, extremely talented. She could have gone a great deal further. She also played the clarinet and the piano.

"I also missed watching her play sport. When Sally was younger she played badminton for Yorkshire. She said she also wanted to play ice hockey for the Hull team, but I told her you need to be able to skate. She then went down every night to learn. I also miss the smaller things like going shopping together and talking about clothes."



Sally Mays during a 10k run. She took her own life after she was turned away by Humber NHS Foundation Trust's crisis team. (Image: Angela Mays)

Angela added: "Her highly competitive nature and natural ability meant that she was assured of success. Sally was also very creative and she loved drawing, painting, photography and drama. As a person, Sally had many diamond-like qualities, in that she was multi-faceted, beautiful, brilliant, sparkling, precious and unique, with diverse facets and reflections.

"Living, by choice, alone in her own apartment, some positive periods followed, most notably when she went to college for two years, gaining a distinction and a place at university. However, at times she struggled to cope with the ever-present shadow her mental health issues presented, frustrating her ambitions, enthusiasm and enjoyment of life."

With so much talent and potential, Angela often thinks about what Sally could be doing now. She also believes Sally would have found a way to cope with her mental health problems and thrive.

“I ponder our life, which is divided by before and after Sally died,” she said. “Her life stopped at 22 and I see her friends now who have all turned 30. There is evidence that as people get older they can better deal with the worst effects of their mental health. I think at 30 she would have been much better.

“There are a lot of myths around Sally and that she always had mental health problems. But, while she was sometimes an anxious child, she had a normal childhood until she developed an eating disorder at around 13-14 years.

“She did put pressure on herself and was a perfectionist who wanted to be top in everything. If she got a mark of 9/10 she would wonder why she didn’t get 10/10.”



Sally Mays killed herself after she was turned away by Humber NHS Foundation Trust’s crisis team. Sally dressed for her prom (Image: Angela Mays)

Coroner Professor Paul Marks upheld the findings from the original inquest, when he was highly critical of the Humber NHS Foundation Trust’s crisis team, who refused Sally admission to a mental health unit. However, in relation to the conversation between Ms

Elliot and Dr Opoku-Fofie, he found it was not a clinical discussion and, therefore, did not amount to a missed opportunity nor constitute any neglect.

But Sally's parents are frustrated that it ever got to this point and feel the authorities involved had the opportunity to disclose information about the conversation long before they had to resort to seeking a new inquest.

Michael Rawlinson, representing the trust, apologised to the family on Wednesday for the failure to disclose all the information, but said the conversation itself did not represent any missed opportunity.

He said: "We apologise unreservedly to Mr and Mrs Mays that there has had to be a second inquest and that details of this conversation did not emerge earlier. To say it is regrettable is an exercise in understatement."

But this late apology announced in open court, rather than through any personal contact with the family, has left Angela and Andy nonplussed.

"We feel relieved we now have all the information, but we are frustrated by the trust's hollow and formulaic apology," Angela said. "It is only under the pressure of scrutiny that they have apologised."

"What we would have liked is for the trust to have acknowledged and talked to us, disclose the information we requested and help us through the process. In seven years not one member of staff ever contacted us."

The need for a second inquest extended the family's legal battle by a couple of years. The number of hearings, investigations and reports has left them physically exhausted. But they have also been left out of pocket and, incredibly, have no recourse to claim back costs.

"There is no linear process for grief," Angela reflected. "But going through this legal battle has massively exacerbated it. We lost our child, which is the worst thing any parent can go through, but we had all this heaped on us. We have not been able to grieve properly for Sally."

"To now be released from all that and remember our daughter can now only be helpful. But we have been through so many inquiries and hearings. As well as two inquests we also had to sit through a 12-day Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) hearing. It has been torturous."

"Part of what kept us going is to try and stop something like this happening again and ensure no one else has to go through something like this. By going through this trauma we hope to lessen the chances of others suffering in the same way."

The family said they feared others could face a similar situation. "Sadly, I don't see any of this changing," Angela said. "I have not seen any lasting improvement so far and I have been contacted by people since Sally's death who have experienced something similar."

"We were lucky in the sense, that being retired, we both had the means and the time to fight for answers. But many other families in a similar situation will have no such legal recourse."

For Angela and Andy, and no doubt for other families who have suffered a similar tragedy, they will forever remain distrustful and cynical of the authorities involved in mental health care.

"The Humber Trust has become very slick in dealing with such incidents," Angela claims.

"They have dealt with quite a few now. They know how to go through the process of an inquiry, an investigation and developing an action plan.

"But this is usually done in-house and it is generally pushed under the carpet. In theory, they tick all the boxes and appear to do the right thing but these mistakes are often repeated and patients and families suffer.

The Mays family will still be around to help other families who find themselves in a similar situation. They were involved in helping draft NHS England's 'Learning from Deaths' guidance on working with families who have suffered a bereavement due in part to, or wholly because of, errors in their NHS healthcare.

"We still have our blog about Sally and I continue to tweet quite a lot of cases similar to Sally's. Some families have asked me for support and I will be attending another inquest in December with similar circumstances to Sally's," Angela said.

"We came into this ignorant of all the processes, but we have learnt so much in these last eight years. It is important we use that knowledge to help other families and we will continue to do that."

A spokesperson from Humber Teaching NHS Foundation Trust, said: "The Trust welcomes the conclusion of the Coroner and has offered an unreserved apology to the family of Sally Mays. The Trust supported all investigations and have implemented actions to make substantial service improvements since the original inquest in 2015.

"The Trust wishes to again convey our deepest sympathies to Sally's family and friends."