

An inspiration

CHARITY fundraiser Jane Tomlinson lost her battle against breast cancer at the age of 43 on Monday. The mother of three raised an incredible £1.75 million.

She was diagnosed with terminal cancer seven years ago, but defied her illness to take part in gruelling challenges, including the New York Marathon and a 4,200-mile bike ride, for charity. Jane received an CBE in June. Her husband and children said: 'We are heartbroken at this loss. Jane said her family has been the greatest joy in her life and we feel honoured to have been blessed with such a wonderful person.' Gordon Brown recalled Jane's 'amazing spirit and strength'. Here, her friend pays tribute...

THE last time I saw Jane Tomlinson was at the beginning of last week. We'd spent three days together at St Gemma's Hospice in Leeds, where she was being cared for because her health was so poor that she could no longer be at home.

Frail and prone to lapses in concentration, it was obvious that she was exhausted; but bloody-minded to the last, she was determined to record more memories on tape for the third book we were writing together about her life.

On that day — a warm, sunny Saturday — she was allowed to go home for the weekend. There, armed with a carrier bag full of painkillers ('just one or two tablets!' she smiled), she prepared a simple lunch of sandwiches and salad.

Even then, she was thinking of others. Proudly showing off her beloved back garden, she picked some home-grown blackberries and runner beans and wrapped them up for my parents.

I knew it would be the last time I saw her, and as we hugged goodbye on the doorstep, I think she knew it, too.

A few days later, last Thursday, her husband Mike, 46, an IT worker, called to say he didn't think she would make it past the weekend. But, of course, she did. It was Jane, after all. In the end, she slipped away in the hospice at 9pm on Monday with Mike at her side.

So, what are we to make of the life and death of this extraordinary woman? Oh, she would hate to be called extraordinary. I can see her wrinkling up her nose at the very word.

Those of us who were closest to her thought she was invincible, that somehow she'd go on for ever. But even boundless enthusiasm and unbending courage could not, in the end, defeat the disease she had fought for seven years.

At 43, the breast and bone cancer that had spurred her to raise more than £1.75 million for charity through a series of remarkable challenges finally claimed her.

It was, thankfully, a peaceful and private end to what had become a very public life — simply because the public had seen something in Jane's extraordinary resolve which appealed to them.

To me though, more than anything, Jane was simply a friend.

We first met in 2002 at the family home in Rothwell, Leeds. It was obvious from the start that the Tomlinsons were a close, if somewhat chaotic, family, with everyone at home, including her three children Suzanne, now 21, Rebecca, 19, and Steven, 11.

Jane, who was a successful paediatric radiographer, had been diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 26. It was devastating news for her young family, but after having her breast and lymph nodes removed, she was told she was in remission.

However, a decade later it returned, and in August 2000, a consultant told her she had six months to live. To Jane, Mike and the three children, it was a shattering blow.

As she sought to come to terms with her heartbreaking diagnosis, she looked for ways to relax and take her mind off the battles that lay ahead. She took up gentle exercise, and as the six months came and went, and she continued to have chemotherapy, she felt well enough to keep running.

Eighteen months after that bleak diagnosis, and to the astonishment of her doctors, she finished the London Marathon.

As a newspaper feature writer, I was sent to interview her. What struck me most when we first met was how down-to-earth she was, telling Steven off for climbing on the furniture, rolling her eyes at Mike's bad jokes.

'Spending time with my family is what makes me happiest,' she said simply. 'Only



by
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last night, we sat round watching TV, eating pizza on our laps, and Mike and I shared a few beers. It was just normal, nothing special and that's what we've tried to do — create a sense of normality.'

She was not gushing, or sorry for herself at all. She was just Jane. 'I don't want to say anything too upsetting,' she said. 'Steven (who was four at the time) can't read yet and I don't want him to get upset when he looks back at these interviews when I'm gone.'

Born in Wakefield and one of nine siblings, Jane spent much of her childhood in Liverpool where her father was an NHS dentist. When she was about 12, the family moved to Adelaide in Australia for three years, before returning to Leeds in the UK, where the family finally settled.

Her formidable and forthright personality didn't lend itself to making instant friends with strangers — particularly journalists — but after the story was published, we kept in touch. It was only then, once her guard came down and I'd gained her trust that I discovered just how funny, warm and caring both she and Mike could be.

We became friends, meeting up in London when they were visiting for a rock concert (she loved music — Rush and Pink Floyd were just two of her favourites) or a business

Told she had six months to live, Jane Tomlinson had two choices: give up or grab every moment. Yesterday, seven years, £2m of fundraising and a CBE later, this mother of three, lost her battle. Here, a friend who spent her last days with her, recalls a truly awesome woman

meeting. Other times, we'd go for a meal at a restaurant in our native Yorkshire, while I was visiting my parents. I was never sure what to expect when I saw her. Jane, the attractive woman with glossy hair, sparkly eyes and a broad smile; or Jane, the cancer patient, with thinning hair, a drawn pixie-face and tired-looking eyes. Whichever it was, her forceful personality and non-nonsense approach always shone through.

By 2003, she had completed a series of physical challenges which were gaining coverage in the media. At that point, she and Mike asked me to help them write their autobiography, *The Luxury Of Time*, and then the sequel *You Can't Take It With You*.

ASTONISHINGLY, even up to last week, Jane was insistent that we do more work on a third and final book about the 4,200-mile bike ride across America which she completed earlier this year.

Just reading through her list of achievements is enough to make an Olympian blanch. She took part in three London marathons. And in 2002, despite the cancer and the immense pain it brought, spreading to her neck, hips, back and shoulders, she took part in the London Triathlon and then, along with Mike, completed the Great North Run.

After that, she announced she would not be doing any more races. But, like Steve Redgrave, the lure of just one more event always proved too much.

It was something I never got used to in all the time I knew her. Whenever we talked about a particularly gruelling event, she was always adamant it would be the last. 'Never

again,' she'd say. 'I just can't put myself through something like that again.' Months — or even weeks — later, Mike would ring and casually drop into conversation that she was busy training for the next one.

With her brother Luke, she completed a 1,060-mile bike ride from John O'Groats to Land's End and then a 2,500-mile Rome To Home bike ride. Later that year she became the only cancer patient to complete a full Ironman triathlon — swimming 2.4 miles, cycling 112 miles and running 26 miles.

But it was in May 2006 that she announced her toughest challenge yet — a 4,200-mile bike ride from San Francisco to New York.

And by June, although too ill to participate herself, she inaugurated a 10km Run For All event in Leeds, which she hoped would become an annual event. Some 8,000 runners took to the streets. For all these events — and more — she won more than 15 awards for her charity efforts. Already an MBE, she was also awarded the CBE in June.

Sadly, Jane was not without her critics. Some refused to believe she was ill. Others — often the cruellest — were fellow cancer sufferers themselves who berated her for making them feel inadequate. I remember her receiving one particular nasty call, from a nurse who purported to care for cancer patients, screaming obscenities down the phone.

Shocked and furious that this woman could intrude into their private life — for it was her own daughter Suzanne who first picked up the phone — Jane called the police and the woman was cautioned.