

# CARING SCOT'S GETAWAY HOME FOR THE BEREAVED

**ANTHONY McMahon was just 11 when his brother died.**

It was 10pm on an August night and they were cutting through the Old Monkland Cemetery on their way home to Coatbridge, Lanarkshire.

John Paul, who was 16, went ahead to help his brother cross the dual carriageway.

As Anthony watched, his brother was knocked down by a car and thrown 100 yards down the road.

John Paul died of his injuries.

This happened in 1984 but the effects have stayed with Anthony.

His parents couldn't deal with their loss and, despite the support of his elder brother and sister, he grew into a fearful, anxious teenager and young adult. It blighted his life.

**Now he's converted a flat in Rothesay into a family retreat, named in honour of John Paul, to help other bereaved parents and children.**

"I've seen all that through my own experience of my brother's death and my parents then having problems," he said. "Their failure to come to terms with it resulted in various forms of illness."

His father drank while his mother had clinical depression. They died at a young age.

Anthony struggled too, with demons that held him back.

He said: "For a num-ber of years, I was living in fear. I worried about what was going to happen next. It prevented me from doing things I

**Anthony McMahon struggled for years to get over the death of a loved one. He tells ANNA BURNSIDE why he created a place where people trying to cope with loss can take refuge**

wanted to do, that I enjoyed doing. I wanted to go to the football. Then I wouldn't go – I would think something drastic will happen.

"It was the same with swimming. I wasn't panicky, just fearful, always thinking of the worst, wondering what the next day is going to bring."

Moving to London and getting a job in the city helped. But it was coming to a favourite island that really started the healing process.

"I had to come to places like Bute," he recalled. "It gave me the belief and hope to say, 'No, it's not going to be like that. Everything's will be OK.'"

Based in London, with his own life coming together, Anthony wanted to help other families. "I kept coming to back Bute for few days away, a wee holiday," he said.

And Rothesay held many happy memories of precious time with his family. Anthony explained: "We would come here for a day out and go for a cycle. I remember coming

with my brother, we'd all hire a bike and go round the island. It was very enjoyable. One of my favourite spots is Kerrycroy. That's where I find a lot of comfort myself."

Anthony bought a flat on the island in 2010.

"Coming on a regular basis, I realised it would be a good place for parents. An ideal spot to get away from it all after a tragedy."

So in December, when the flat next door to his came on to the market, he snapped it up.

**Since then, Anthony has spent all his spare time transforming the £45,000 flat into a retreat that's ready to welcome visitors.**

A new bathroom, triple-glazing, a smart new TV and sofa bed later and he reckons he has spent a total of £60,000 upgrading the property.

It's not finished yet. His next step will be to rip up the carpets and replace them with wooden flooring.

Bereaved families find the John Paul Retreat via Compassionate Friends, an international support group. It's free to come and stay and Anthony is looking at ways to help struggling families with travel costs.

The first visitors were a bereaved mother and her daughter.

"We lost my other daughter a few years ago and we have had a very tough time getting our lives back together," she told Anthony.

"My surviving daughter is now 10 years old. I am unable to afford a holiday for her this year and I think that a break on Bute would be very good for us both. I went there as a

child and enjoyed the peace and freedom of the island.

"Grace died aged 18 months back in 2012. Although she had cerebral palsy, we did not expect her to leave us so soon. Fionna was only seven when her sister left us. I should never forget that she has lost too."

Anthony has thought of everything to make visitors comfortable. If he's busy in London, volunteers from the local church meet them from the ferry.

Staff from a nearby shop make sure there is milk in the fridge and all the essentials in the cupboard.

He's compiled an information pack with details of everything from the tour bus to the bike hire shop. He's looking forward to welcoming more families, from across the UK and further away, to Rothesay.

Later this month, a couple with two teenage sons, who lost their third boy just three months ago, are coming up from the Lake District.

The boys were not keen at first.

**Anthony spoke to them on the phone at length and persuaded them that it would be good for everyone. He also offered them his own flat, so they could all have a bit of space.**

He said: "That's how I managed to persuade them. They didn't want to be with mum and dad, they said they couldn't handle that for

a week. Opening up my own flat seemed appropriate and the right thing to do.

"If I'm going to do this, I need to do it fully and put everything into it."

There are more bookings for the run up to Christmas. A family from Australia are making arrangements to come over next summer.

Couples whose marriage is straining to cope with bereavement, siblings struggling to understand their parents' pain – Anthony hopes to welcome them all.

There was no help like this for his own parents when John Paul died.

He said: "My brother died in 1984. Back in those days, counselling wasn't very much available. And dad was the kind of person who would say, 'I don't do this, I don't see the need'. Even though he was ill.

"I don't know if denial's the right word but they tried to pretend it didn't happen, to put their minds off it and keep busy. But they didn't cope well, they didn't get counselling and they both passed on at early age. Dad was 51 and mum was 57.

"I can see from family experience how parents can find it really difficult. People who have lost all hope and belief in themselves don't want to do anything.

"That's why I want to give them some peace and tranquillity before they have to go away and face things again."

● Visit [campaign.just-giving.com/charity/compfriends/johnpaulsretreat/](http://campaign.just-giving.com/charity/compfriends/johnpaulsretreat/)



» **I realised it was good a place for parents. An ideal place to get away from it all after tragedy**

ANTHONY

**POIGNANT** John Paul died in 1984 and parents, right, never recovered