**OUR FIRST TCF RETREAT AT MANOIR MOURET, ANDILLAC, FRANCE – AUGUST 2022**

A huge thank you to Christina, Trudy, Lisa, Bob and Lynda for sharing their thoughts on their visit to Manoir Mouret and allowing us to share these with other potential TCF guests. We so enjoyed meeting each and every one of the TCF guests who came in 2022. *Margaret & Jack*

**Christina’s Thoughts**

Sometimes in life, something wonderful comes your way quite unexpectedly, entirely down to the kindness of others . This is exactly what happened for a small group of bereaved parents in August this summer, when we were able to experience at first hand the incredible generosity, empathy and compassion of Margaret and Jack Reckitt, our hosts at Manoir Mouret, Andillac, SW France.

Margaret is a bereaved sibling herself, having lost her dear brother many years before and experiencing not only her own grief, but also witnessing that of her devastated parents. It was her and Jack’s dream that one day they would be able to help bereaved parents and siblings in some way with their own loss. This year, following a lot of hard work and refurbishment of their beautiful Manoir, she and Jack contacted TCF with the incredibly generous offer of a week-long free retreat for parents, in the hope that it would be a restorative, peaceful escape from the day to day stress and pain of life in the months and years following the loss of our child or sibling.

I was lucky enough to be one of the TCF guests on this initial retreat and I cannot tell you how amazing it was. Not only is the Manoir stunningly beautiful, right in the middle of rolling French countryside surrounded by vineyards and even an olive grove, but the peace, quiet and closeness to nature we experienced was incredible. The Manoir itself has several gorgeous double bedrooms with en suite facilities, there are a handful of separate gites just a few yards away from the main house and there is also the most beautiful barn conversion – The Grange - that I have ever stayed in. It has three beautiful double bedrooms, separate bathrooms and is fully self-catering. The decor and furnishings throughout all the buildings is elegant, beautiful and simply just calms the soul as you feel you are being enveloped in total comfort and beauty at every turn. There’s a Quiet Room where you can simply sit and read, sinking into large sofas, a huge shared communal kitchen to prepare the evening meal or meet up for breakfast and lunch, and several spaces inside and out where we could linger over dinner, talking into the night. The views are superb, you can see for miles to sleepy villages, church towers and vines on the gentle hills surrounding the Manoir. We were lucky enough to have warm sun in late August and so were able to relax around the pool, play tennis on the private court, or just go exploring on countryside rambles.

Not content with offering their guests this wonderful place to stay, Margaret and Jack were on hand to help with travel information and local advice, (there’s a small village just 5 minutes’ drive away, and also a couple of supermarkets for a bigger shop about 15 minutes’ drive away), they even organised for some of us to pick grapes in the nearest vineyards. I should say that prior to owning the Manoir, they were vineyard owners, and even built a winery to press their own grapes. This lovely couple are truly inspirational! I’d never picked grapes in my life before and just to have this one experience, with the sun rising on a warm summer’s morning , was so uplifting – and very hard work! We even got to taste the fresh-pressed grape juice once the grapes had been delivered to the winery. Sharing a flask of shockingly strong cafe noir half-way through our morning shift, we felt deep gratitude – this was a Good Day.

Our group of a dozen or so bereaved parents quickly bonded over our shared losses – and a special friendship grew almost overnight. This was a TCF retreat like no other as there is nothing organised. But most of us have experienced that deep recognition and empathy when we meet other bereaved parents, some very newly so, and we all able to listen, and to share, our feelings, however short or long our path of loss. It was a relief to be able to share a little about my son Adam, as this retreat allowed for everyone to be ‘off duty’ and after 15 years I rarely get to talk about him these days. Also, it really helps more newly bereaved parents to see hands-on, by simply being with those longer bereaved, that life really can be enjoyed again at some time in the future despite our devastating loss – it gives them hope.

So although there was no crafting, and no workshops, we would simply meet up over coffee and croissants for breakfast, or for a walk if anyone wanted company, a game of tennis for the more energetic, or a swim in the pool, or find somewhere in the beautiful grounds to take our book and relax for an hour or two. For me, one of the special highlights of my stay was that we all ate together in the evening (you don’t have to, but it just seemed to happen organically) round a huge table that I’m sure could easily seat 20 people quite comfortably. Those who wanted to cook took a turn at a communal dish each evening, with salads and fresh crusty bread and sometimes a dessert. And afterwards we all helped clear away. One evening I particularly remember, it was the anniversary of the loss of one of the children. We’d invited Margaret and Jack to join us for dinner that night as the week was coming to an end, and as the evening closed in, some tealights, arranged in a heart shape, were lit and placed on the table . At that point, sitting all together, with our own tears flowing, and our own memories, we really felt like family.

I would like to thank everyone on the Mouret retreat for one of the most incredible sharing experiences of my life. Thank you so much to TCF for giving me the opportunity of this wonderful retreat.

I cannot recommend this retreat highly enough, if any bereaved parents are thinking of going in 2023.

And to Margaret and Jack, I cannot thank you both enough for offering your beautiful Manoir Mouret, your time and your love to all of us who were there that week. I do hope that somehow my son Adam can see, after 15 years, that his mum is in a good place and with such special people around her.

**Lisa’s Thoughts**

“I honestly don’t even know where to begin when feeding back about Mouret. I could probably write about the place for hours. From the minute we put our names down, to finding out we were going, then arriving in France, I was so apprehensive about the whole thing. I was still on the sick from work and could barely even manage the shops without a panic attack. I was convinced this was a bad idea.

At this point in my life, 18 months after losing my son, I knew there was NOTHING that could ever be helpful to me. Absolutely nothing could bring a smile to my face that wasn’t fake, nothing. I probably shouldn’t have come and I ought to just go home, is what I thought to myself most of the journey there, but I was wrong.

Margaret came to greet us as we arrived and showed us to our Gite. It was absolutely perfect. There was nothing that Margaret and Jack hadn’t thought about in preparation for our arrival, from the amazing, prepared meal and all the wonderful home comforts. The warm welcome and attention to detail really was incredible.

For the first time in 18 months, I didn’t spend my days constantly wondering what the point was anymore. Instead, there were sunrises and scenery that reminded me about the beauty of life, despite everything. I was able to relax, really relax, with others who just knew and understood. I felt heard and comfortable listening to, and spending time with others.

We spent the days taking in the beauty of the place and just ‘being’. Away from all the hustle and bustle of regular life, I had imagined that all I would do is dwell and become lost in a pit of negative thoughts but it was completely the opposite. It was incredibly helpful to slow down without an agenda.

Part way through the week, during the yoga session, I realised I had experienced a moment of peace. A moment where I had thought of nothing. Something I imagined would never be possible again. There were so many fleeting moments like this. Moments where I considered that maybe experiencing joy was a realistic possibility at some point. I even slept for the entire night, really slept!

We laughed, we cried, we played tennis and swam, enjoyed fantastic food and felt truly blessed to be around such an incredible group of people. The surroundings could not have been any more beautiful.

I didn’t know how much my soul needed this retreat. The whole experience was beyond wonderful and I feel such gratitude towards Margaret and Jack for their incredible kindness and generosity, and so thankful for the compassionate friends for this opportunity.

**Trudy’s Thoughts**

“When I read about the opportunity to go away to Manoir Mouret in France with TCF, I made the spontaneous decision to throw caution to the wind and book myself a place on it. My daughter Matilda took her life age 18 in Aug 2020 and having experienced the empty feeling which came in the aftermath of the first anniversary of her passing, I made the rash decision to fill the days after her second anniversary in a different setting. I couldn’t have hoped for a nicer one! Nestled in Southern France about an hour from Toulouse Manor Mouret is remote, tranquil, beautiful and surrounded by vineyards. It is run by Margaret and Jack who are 2 of the kindest, thoughtful people I have met and who went out of their way to ensure that as a group all our queries were quickly answered. Their accommodation is spacious, comfortable, clean and well equipped and the weather was perfect for lazing quietly around the outdoor pool.

There was a real sense of calmness the week I stayed and to be honest other than swimming, wandering, a pilates class and a massage, I did very little which was perfect! As a lone traveller, I stayed in the main house with other TCF parents who have been on this unwelcome journey a lot longer than me. We all collaborated with preparing and cooking food and I can honestly say that I ate so well that week, especially cheese and bread! The grounds of Mouret also host some wonderful fruit trees which were definitely utilised in our salads and desserts. The group were very welcoming and there was always the opportunity to socialise or just tuck yourself away. I came back feeling glad that I had taken this leap of faith in this new life that I now find myself in.”

**Bob & Lynda’s Thoughts**

“Margaret and Jack own a Retreat place, Manoir Mouret, in South West France that can accommodate up to 24 people. They got in touch with The Compassionate Friends and offered the accommodation to members free of charge. This year, being the first, they offered a week then following years it will be 3 weeks. The stone-built house and the three barn apartments surround an enclosed courtyard and sit in five acres of grounds which include a swimming pool and tennis court. There is also an on-site gym/studio.

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When I first read about it I didn’t say anything to Lynda because after Darren had died whilst on holiday in France we had said that we didn’t wish to visit France and also Darren’s Angelversary fell in the middle of the week on offer. Then a couple who we had met through TCF messaged me saying that she and her husband were going and how about joining them. So I talked it over with Lynda and we decided that this was an opportunity to break the “we’re not going to France” thoughts and be with people who understand the emotions we were going to go through. So we applied and eventually we got accepted.

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Our destination is just north of Toulouse. We checked the various means of transport and we decided to check the possibility of flying, until, because of airport restrictions, there was only two BA flights from Heathrow on the Saturday, one too early to get there by public transport and the other not arriving until late evening.

So in the end we decided to go by car. The reasons being, number one we would use the Channel Tunnel which we had never been through before (and Lynda doesn’t travel well on boats) and number two on the way back, according to how we were feeling, we could see the place where Darren had been staying at and also, hopefully, find the Unicorn statute that Darren was feeding a chocolate bar to in the last photograph taken of Darren. With that in mind, we decided to travel via Tours on the west side of France (also avoiding the motorways around Paris). So I booked to travel on the Friday, stay the night in Tours and on the return stay in Tours on the Saturday, returning home on the Sunday.

Our departure time from Folkestone on the Friday was 8.36am and we had to be there at least an hour before then. So it was an early departure from home, 4.30am. We got to Folkestone with time to spare and we had a pit stop before we joined the boarding queue. At this time we should of got an earlier shuttle than scheduled. We got on to the ramp leading down to the train only to be held up. Eventually we were told that the train had broken down and we would have to go to another train. So we followed the lead car and boarded the train from the wrong direction (instead of driving straight on to the train we had to do a U-turn. We eventually left Folkestone about 9.20am, nearly an hour later than scheduled.

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This was the first time I had driven in France since 1988 and because of the distance involved we decided to use motorways where we were able to. We had a good journey to Tours, there were plenty of places to pull off the motorways for toilet breaks/coffee breaks, etc. We had driven 437.8 miles, a total travelling time of just over 11 hours.

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The “hotel” we had booked into was a budget hotel, the room was virtually a pod, with room for a bed, a small desk with 1 chair and a compact toilet/shower/hand basin room, there was also a few shelves. No tea-making facilities, no cups and a few power points (but not one right next to the bed). The main thing, though, it was clean and it was only for one night. The breakfast was sufficient for our needs.

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We left as early as we could Saturday and again went via motorways. It was a very good journey down, we travelled 313.2 miles and we arrived about 4pm. Total travelling time today of 7 hours 10 minutes. We were greeted by Margaret who showed us to our accommodation.

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The converted barns are known as Gîtes and our Gîte was called Duras. It has its own separate entrance & private outside terrace with a table and chairs. Large open kitchen, dining and seating area. Half floor up are bedrooms 1 & 2 on the same level, each with en-suite. One bedroom has a king bed and the other bedroom can be configured with either a super-king bed or twin single beds. The Gîte had everything you could think of for a self-catering holiday, all nicely laid out and clean. There were even books and games provided. Jack & Margaret also provided us with a chilli dinner we could heat up as we'll as some basic food items, including bread, butter, milk, tea, coffee and even fruit.

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In the welcoming letter Margaret and Jack included: “Cats Outdoors — There are two black and white cats who live happily in the grounds chasing mice. We feed them ever day. They are outdoor cats and should not come into the house or become socialised so please don’t encourage them in any way. Thank you. By the way, White Faced Cat is unaware that he is not socialised.” That was so true, we never saw the other cat but invariably if we sat out on our patio White Faced Cat used to appear and it is very hard to ignore a cat that is rubbing himself against your legs. As the week went on we had to keep the door to the Gîte closed if the cat was about, he certainly was forgetting he is not socialised.

We were joined by another couple, who had the use of another Gîte, and six ladies (all bereaved parents), who stayed in the main house. We mainly catered for ourselves but we did join with the others on several occasions, the first was the Sunday night when Jack and Margaret provided with us with a very good dinner.

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We had a very enjoyable, peaceful, and at times emotional, week. Lynda made good use of the swimming pool, going in every day. We shared a lot with the others but also had our own space. The others in the group made good use of the tennis court and Lynda and I actually had a go at table tennis and everything was provided for both sports, there was other games equipment available as well.

Lynda and I visited a town called Albi one day and apart from a trip to the local supermarket and a walk to the local village, Andillac, didn’t go far at all. Andillac didn’t have any shops as such. It had a (trying to be polite here) junk shop, which on Google Maps is called a Home Furniture Shop, and another work place which restores furniture but also had a lot of other second-hand items in 2 workshops. There was one other feature of Andillac and that was a “living wall”. This was an oblong water feature with a trellis rising above it and this was covered in plants.

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We were all offered the opportunity to go grape-picking and visiting the distillery, but as Lynda and I have back problems and grape-picking involves bending we declined the offer but all the others went and enjoyed it.

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Of course, we talked about our children (thank you all for sharing). We said about our thoughts on visiting the place where Darren had stayed and finding the unicorn and our friends gave us a lot of support and encouragement to go for it. Also on the 31st was Darren’s angelversary, so the ladies invited us to join them for the evening meal, also Jack and Margaret and the other couple. They raised a glass to Darren and then we raised a glass to all of our children and siblings. During the evening they brought out a tray with lit tea-lights in a shape of a heart for us. A very emotional but enjoyable evening.”