

'GIVING BACK THROUGH NATURE HAS HEALED MY GRIEF'

After a family tragedy, Tish Feilden, 69, found comfort opening her home to others with the help of her son Jamie, transforming thousands of young lives in the process



Tish and son Jamie love welcoming young people to Jamie's Farm

The beauty of the countryside can still move me. It did so recently when I returned to my Somerset home after being at my daughter's for a few days with a broken leg. Looking out at the green fields, with the lambs frolicking in the sunshine, I shed a tear. I hadn't realised until that moment that the healing power of nature was just what I needed.

In the middle of it all is Sheephouse farm, which has been our family home for more than 35 years. My late husband, Richard, and I moved to this beautiful place near Bath when our boys, Jamie and Fergus, were five and three, shortly before our daughter, Rowan, was born. To start with, it was derelict and we roughed it, living in a caravan waiting for planning permission to come through. I remember thinking that if we could make the farm how we wanted it, one day I'd throw open the doors and fill our home with people.

I'm an eternal optimist, a free spirit. Richard, who I married in 1975 when I was a 21-year-old student, was more of a realist. What we shared was a can-do spirit, a willingness to take risks - as we did with the house - and a belief that you were put on this earth to contribute, to make the world a better place. We passed those values on to our children.

With Richard working long hours and building a successful architect's practice, our home became a reflection of my way of doing things - chaotic and fun. Jamie, Fergus and Rowan loved the idea of farming, so we'd go to the market and buy animals, gradually adding to our busy smallholding, while I also carried on working as a teacher and, later, a psychotherapist in schools. Richard thought my farming follies were madness, but the children and I had such fun.

Jamie in particular was obsessed with farming. By 14, he had around 60 cows, sheep and pigs, and also mucked in on neighbouring farms. He came alive in the fields and it was all he wanted to do, but Richard worried that there wasn't a future in farming. Jamie, who loved children, too, ended up becoming a teacher and, with his strong social conscience, found himself a world away from our fields teaching at a state school in Croydon, south London.

DARKER DAYS

In early January 2005, our family life was upended. Jamie was 24, Fergus was 21 and studying at Cambridge, while Rowan, 17, was still at school. We'd barely unpacked from a wonderful family holiday in France and waved Jamie off to London when Richard said he was going to our woodland to chop down some trees. He wanted to create a glade as a memorial to his father, who had died the spring before.

Before I left him there with his chainsaw, we talked about the sound of the trees. He told me they were chattering to each other, and then he promised he'd be careful and that he'd be home by 4pm. With no sign of him at twilight, I jumped into

the car and drove up to the glade. As I ran through the woods to where I'd left him, I could hear the sound of the chainsaw, and then I saw him on the ground, crushed by the trunk of an ash tree. He was lying with his face up to the sky, looking untouched and entirely peaceful, but I knew he was dead.

Instead of panicking, a kind of calm descended, as if my head and my heart were split into two. Surrounded by the love of friends, I think I went into a kind of shock. We had an extraordinary funeral in Bath Abbey, attended by more than a thousand people, and then we buried Richard in a willow coffin in the stunning glade where he had fallen, digging the grave ourselves. I knew that is what he would have wanted, just as he would have known, too, if it had been me.

I remember feeling out of kilter with the world in the days that followed. Everyone was carrying on with their lives while I was engulfed by sadness. At 4pm every day for years, the grief would hit me. There were times when I would scream and shout, sometimes angry at Richard for thinking he was invincible.

But I also found great comfort in not feeling any regret. Richard had loved his life, he had died in a way I think he would have chosen and we were closer than ever when the accident happened. I had a full tank of love inside me, topped up from our recent holiday, and that kept me going through the darkest of days.

I had a full tank of love inside me that kept me going through the dark days

OPENING UP OUR HOME

After Rowan left school and went travelling, the house felt empty. With her leaving and Richard's death, there was a crater in my life, a void that needed filling. Just 50 when I became a widow, I went to Uganda for a while and ended up training

communities there in counselling, finding comfort in helping others and not being reminded of my loss at every step. When I came home, I felt ready to work again as a psychotherapist in schools. But I found Jamie at a crossroads. Through his teaching, he'd seen many children struggling to engage with school, and he started to wonder if the disadvantaged youngsters he was working with might benefit from time in the countryside, just as he had himself. He'd taken two sheep from home into the school for the pupils to care for and had noticed a change in their attitude and behaviour almost instantly.

He realised these young people had never enjoyed the freedom and open spaces that he had taken for granted as a child, and it was affecting their behaviour. He and I started nurturing an idea - could we bring the children having a difficult time to stay in our home, to experience



Tish and Richard wed in 1975; their children grew up on the farm



Personal journey

farming first-hand, and provide some kind of therapy or support at the same time? It felt right to open our home to others, just as I'd hoped all those years ago when we'd first moved in. Our idea also combined Jamie's loves: farming, helping children and doing something that made a difference. But it was Richard's death that gave us the motivation to get on and do it. When it feels like the worst thing has happened to you, risks take on a different perspective. I took Richard's death as a sign to fill my home.

INGREDIENTS OF FAMILY LIFE

We organised our first trip to Sheephouse Farm in 2006, initially bringing seven children from Jamie's school to stay with us for a week. It was chaos, but we could see, even in just a few days, that we could make a difference.

In the first year, we had two or three groups of children come to stay, getting grubby in the fields or with the animals during the day and then cooking and eating together in the evenings. We replicated the important parts of family and community and gave them a sense of purpose and belonging, providing a secure place where honesty and reflection were welcomed and encouraged. Some of them had never set foot in the countryside, nor knew about the value of working hard, breaking a sweat and getting something positive out of it. Others had rarely felt truly safe. We saw these young people change before our eyes. We saw their attitudes begin to soften and their bravado fall away. Their teachers told us their behaviour improved.

After three years, the project had grown and was taking over our lives and our home. That's when we gave up our day jobs and managed to raise the funds to buy Hill House Farm just a few miles down the road, where we managed to replicate the feeling of home and safety that we'd had at Sheephouse Farm. From there, we were gradually able to grow to where we are today – a charity, Jamie's Farm, with seven farms across the country. To date, 14,000 youngsters have passed through our doors.

All our sites, except the one in inner London, are charming old farmhouses, with spaces where everyone can cook together, eat together and then sit and play games or cards in the evening. Young people hand in their phones when they arrive. It's the ingredients of family life that



Everyone staying at the farm eats together



Jamie's Farm has Queen Camilla's support

We give young people the opportunity to reflect and talk

make it work, and we give the youngsters the space and opportunity to reflect and talk.

The young people we meet have often had a turbulent start to life. They may be aggressive or totally switched off from school, but here they are safe, they don't have to watch their backs, and the gentlest souls often emerge.

I remember one who was constantly acting the clown, desperately trying to impress, but he kept getting it wrong and so was laughed at, bullied and shamed. Through talking to him,

he was able to let his guard down and be liked for who he really was. Another time, I found myself walking through the valley with a young man who was a real Jack-the-lad, a big chap with earrings and, some might think, quite scary-looking. Then, suddenly, he just stopped, all his swagger gone, and looked across the fields. He turned to me and remarked, with a kind of wonder in his voice, how beautiful it all was.

Some of the young people later tell us that they've based their own family life on the template we provided. Others, from our early days, have now come back to work with us.

From the early days, Queen Camilla has been our patron. She visited Hill House Farm back in 2012 and has been involved ever since. She's very human, very curious about our work and you get the feeling that she's genuinely concerned about what we do.

REMEMBERING RICHARD

The essence of Richard is here in everything we do. Our three children, who now each have three children of their own, all share their father's values about making the world a better place and providing resources to create positive change. Fergus is a wonderful architect, Rowan is running a group for women called The She Collective and Jamie ploughs his time and energy into Jamie's Farm. Like his father, he has a can-do spirit and is willing to take risks and work hard. He also has Richard's ability to light up a room, connect with people and make things happen.

The charity has been a lifesaver for me. Thanks to Jamie's Farm – and my wonderful family – I've never felt lonely. Of course I've missed Richard immensely, especially when Jamie, Fergus and Rowan all got married and our grandchildren arrived, but the hole left by his death has been filled by the friendship, warmth and sense of purpose I've found.

• For more information, visit jamiesfarm.org.uk □