

SCHOOLBOY'S MOVING

MESSAGE OF HOPE TO GARY SPEED'S HEARTBROKEN SONS

Dad and me

PROUD FATHER
Kevin with baby Luke



THE anguish of Gary Speed's two sons in the wake of his apparent suicide is too deep to imagine.

The football ace, found hanged at his Cheshire home on Sunday, was devoted to his boys Ed, 14, and Tommy, 13. Tragically, 14-year-old Luke Mitchell knows how they may be feeling. His dad Kevin, 52, a financial adviser, hanged himself at their family home in Cuckfield, West Sussex, in February 2009.

With no history of mental problems, Kevin's death shocked everyone - and left Luke and his mum Claire bereft.

Luke wants to help lift the stigma that surrounds families affected by suicide. Here, showing bravery beyond his years, he writes an eloquent and emotional open letter to Ed and Tommy Speed.

Dear Ed and Tommy,

WHEN I first heard about your dad's death, I felt really sad. When I heard how he had died, I was shocked. Another life lost in a horrible way - and exactly the way I lost my dad. I understand how you may be feeling right now.

Two years after dad died, I feel I'm almost out the other side. But I feel bad that you are having to go through a dark time of confusion and sorrow.

Losing my dad has taught me the importance of sharing your feelings with others.

My dad was too proud to talk about his emotions. But bad things happen when you keep them pent up.

I hope that you have someone close to talk to, I hope you know that other young people are in your situation, and I hope that it might help if I share my feelings with you.

I imagine you may feel as if the pause button has been pressed on your lives.

My life stopped the moment my mum said: 'Luke, we think daddy's killed himself.'

It had been an ordinary kind of morning until then, an ordinary kind of life. But with those words I felt an invisible helmet being placed on my head with a visor falling over my eyes, so I couldn't feel anything.

I felt numb. I didn't cry. I went to school and had a cello lesson. I was busy coping.

My dad's funeral was a blur. I got through it by holding my mum's hand really, really tightly. I tried to say goodbye to dad as graciously as I could. I did a speech and told everyone about dad's life achievements, how nice he was, how good he was and how much I'd miss him. I didn't need to tell everyone I loved him, it was there in the way I spoke.

I love talking to mum about dad. My favourite memories of him were sitting down together to have our Sunday roast dinners. He was at his best then. Relaxed, upbeat and enjoying his Yorkshire puddings.

He'd scoff the lot and then we'd sit together



He gives me a kiss

CUDDLES Big hug from daddy



Family outing

TRIP Luke on holiday with parents

watching typical Sunday telly like Antiques Roadshow. I miss dad taking me to the skateboard park. I miss him taking me swimming. I miss him full stop.

Even though he didn't always show affection, I always knew it was there. Even though I didn't tell him I loved him every day, he knew it. And just because he left me, doesn't mean he didn't love me.

SHOCK

There is probably a lot of fuss around you right now. People rallied around me and mum, baking cakes, offering lifts and doing all these nice things for me.

Now the shock has worn off and I realise that dad's really gone. But so are those people. I didn't know I'd feel much worse months later. And people aren't here.

People don't understand how it feels to lose someone to suicide. They are frightened by it, so instead of talking about it, they walk away just when you need them.

That hurts even more. Everyone tiptoed around me and that was frustrating.

In the end I told my friends not to be afraid

I lost my dad in the same way as you have.. you may not believe me now but you will feel happy again



COURAGEOUS
Luke opens up in emotional letter

Pictures: CARL FOX



BEREFT
Luke with his mum Claire

I have a real longing for daddy. I want to touch him. To hear his voice

to talk to me. But when they ask how I am I always say 'fine', because that's what they want to hear. I can't just blurt out that I have horrible nightmares about daddy, horrific images of him suddenly seeping into my brain. I can't say I have recurring dreams that daddy is standing in front of me with his arms out to me, but then I wake up and he's not there.

I can't say it's hard not to think about the way he died.

It's good to talk to someone who doesn't have a past with you. I've been having counselling, it's really helped.

A lady from Winston's Wish, the charity for bereaved children, came to speak to me.

I worried that talking to my mum would upset her too, but I can let my feelings go to the charity worker and she's trained not to be affected by my situation.

That helps. It's hard talking about it sometimes, but I



LOSS Gary Speed and wife Louise

always feel better afterwards. Winston's Wish also helped me meet other young people in the same situation. We clicked because we have something so important in common. It's easy to think you're the only one in the world feeling so down.

Don't be afraid to ask about what happened. I am learning more about my dad. I understand why he was tense and a bit cold in the last year of his life. Dad was depressed, but too afraid to talk about it so we couldn't see it.

Mum always encouraged him to talk about his feelings, and said if he felt really low he should see a doctor. But dad wasn't having any of it. He was too proud.

No one knows what's inside other people unless they talk. But grown men often don't.

I will definitely not be like that when I'm older. Not after what I've been through. The

feeling I have now is a real longing for daddy. I want more than anything to touch him. To hear his voice. To get to know him again. Even just to have him back for one minute to put my arm around his shoulder.

If I could have my dad in front of me now, first I'd give him a big fat hug. I'd tell him I wish he hadn't been so proud and say: 'Dad, don't ever do anything like that again.'

ANGRY

I'm not angry with dad. I learned from Winston's Wish that suicide doesn't happen for one reason, but many layers of reasons.

Winston's Wish appeared like a big hand that steered me through my grief. They taught me that physical things can keep memories alive and help me think about his whole life, not just the way he died.

I have dad's red waistcoat. It still smells of him. I smell it in bed and it sends me to sleep. It smells of deodorant, shaving cream and toothpaste - of something special inside him that sets off something in me.

Lots of things around the house are still the same, yet home is completely different. Dad's glasses are in the same place, his sock

drawer is still there. But the spirit of the house has changed. There's a big gap.

Christmas will be difficult. Dad loved Christmas. It's hard when everything is meant to be fun, but all I have in the back of my mind is a wish that dad was here.

You might not believe me now, but you will feel happy again. Life won't ever be the same, but it will be happy again.

Sometimes I just bumble along and am OK, but other days I feel so down I can't go to school. I cheer up when I do things I enjoy, like playing guitar or cello. Dad always loved to hear me play music.

I feel that my dad is watching over me, keeping me safe. Thinking of him encourages me at school. I hope he is proud of me. I feel sure your dad is proud of you.

Try to stay strong. And know you have a friend here if you need me.

Luke

FIND out more about Winston's Wish by visiting www.winstonswish.org.uk. Its helpline is: 08452 030405

As told to **JULIE McCAFFREY**