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Jessica Morris

Jessica Morris, a British-born public relations executive, was hiking with friends in the Catskill mountains, upstate New York, in January 2016 when she “started to feel inexplicably odd”. Writing in *The New York Times* 18 months later, she continued: “I wanted to alert my companions that something was wrong, but there was a disconnect between the desire to speak and my ability to do so. Then my eyelids closed and that was that: a full-blown seizure, followed by an ambulance ride off the mountain, and brain surgery two days later.”

Her diagnosis was glioblastoma, the aggressive brain cancer that ended the lives of Senator John McCain, Tessa Jowell MP and Beau Biden, President Biden’s son. According to the National Cancer Registration and Analysis Service about 2,200 cases are diagnosed in England each year. Doctors soon pointed out that the standard treatment of surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy was, as her neuro-oncologist delicately put it, suboptimal. “Bluntly, for a vast majority of patients, it doesn’t work,” she wrote. Median survival was 14 months; only one in 20 people survive for five years.

The remaining five and a half years of Morris’s life were dedicated to Our Brain Bank, the campaigning organisation she founded to “shift the axis of cancer treatment from the lab to the patient”. It would also ensure that patients were aware of the latest research and researchers were in contact with a ready-made pool of potential subjects for clinical trials. She nicknamed her tumour TEF, short for “the evil f***er”, wrote about her progress on a lively and irreverent blog and in a memoir, *All in my Head*, which will be published this year, and recorded a podcast, Weeble, with her son that documents her experiences of living with a tumour.

Morris, who remained fired with energy and passion, lived to see Our Brain Bank grow from a one-woman operation into an international organisation, connecting people with glioblastoma from around the world. Last month funding from Novocure, which supplied the protective helmet that she wore after surgery, enabled the charity to employ its first chief executive

officer.

Jessica Jane Morris was born in Greenwich, southeast London, in 1963, the youngest of three children of Bill Morris, an architect, and his wife, Elizabeth (née Villar), a printmaker. Her brother, Ben, became an architect, and her sister, Frances, is the director of Tate Modern in London. They grew up in a musical household. “Even when I was a hard-partying teenager, I still got up at 8.30am on a Sunday to sing at St Alfege’s [church choir] without a word of protest,” she wrote.

She learnt to drive at the age of 17 and immediately after passing her driving test she appropriated her mother’s Citroën 2CV. “I took to driving as I did to smoking: like a duck to water, so to speak,” she recalled.

From Haberdashers’ Aske’s Hatcham College she went on to read history at King’s College, Cambridge, where she met Ed Pilkington, now a *Guardian* journalist. They married in 1993 and he survives her with their three children: Felix, who is hoping to pursue law studies; Tess, a student at McGill University in Montreal; and Emma, who is about to start at Georgetown University in Washington DC.

After graduating, Morris spent almost a year in Nicaragua working as a cotton picker, acquiring an understanding of the poverty and basic conditions in which many of the world’s people live. On her return she worked for crusading charities such as the Refugee Council and the housing charity Shelter. She moved to Fishburn Hedges, a PR company, but even there she mixed corporate work for organisations such as Barclays bank and Lloyd’s of London with the charitable sector, including the Spastics Society, which she helped to rebrand as Scope. With the arrival of her family she went solo, still combining corporate work with public-service clients, and chaired the Sheila McKechnie Foundation, which recognises the work of social campaigners.

The family moved to New York in 2006, where her husband eventually became chief reporter for *The Guardian* US and she worked for the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, helping city authorities to develop sustainable transport provision, before setting up a New York branch of Fishburn in 2013. It merged with

FleishmanHillard, a global marketing agency, in late 2015, but within a month Morris had suffered her first seizure and thereafter devoted her energies to Our Brain Bank.

The family lived in the Park Slope neighbourhood of Brooklyn, where Morris was involved in community events. She had continued to sing and belonged to several choirs over the years.

She was a self-described petrolhead and her love of English driving culture once almost proved to be her undoing in the US.

“Ed and I were heading upstate, me at the wheel, gliding along. Him telling me to slow down as per usual — yada-yada-yada — and me ignoring him, also as per usual,” she wrote of one eventful outing. “Just as in the movies, the police car lights up, blasts out, and I pull over. An extremely tall man with a fancy hat and sunglasses strolls over.” Unable to produce any identification, a US driving licence or a British one, she deployed her English accent, offered profuse apologies and was allowed to go with only a warning, later recalling with much relief how “my ability to act, spin, manipulate, whatever, had got me out of a potentially tricky situation”.

Jessica Morris, PR executive and campaigner, was born on July 22, 1963. She died of complications from glioblastoma on June 8, 2021, aged 57

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