

Title: **Episode 1. Gone too soon**

Speakers: Georgie Vestey, Dead Honest & Cheryl Johnson, Memorial Photographer, Remember My Baby

Interview Transcription

Georgie Vestey: What are the limitations you have as a photographer? You've got to be very sensitive; I can imagine?

Cheryl Johnson: Yes. Most newborn photographers take photos of babies naked; our babies are always dressed, and they are generally wrapped.

Georgie Vestey: Why is that?

Cheryl Johnson: Because their skin is particularly fragile and also, they are going to be cold, so they tend to be dressed and wrapped in blankets. Sometimes I think that's for mum to stop feeling how cold the baby feels, perhaps? Also they are very floppy, so if they're bound, you can keep them still and hold them that bit easier, yeah.

Georgie Vestey: Handle with care.

Cheryl Johnson: Yeah, and love.

Georgie Vestey: And handle with love.

Georgie Vestey: I'm Georgie Vestey and this is Dead Honest, a podcast where we talk honestly about death. In this first season, I'm talking to the professionals who help us when we die. Not the first responders like the paramedics, but the people who do the jobs we very rarely see. People like Cheryl, who you were just hearing, a professional photographer with a pretty heart-breaking day job.

On most days you'll find her on a maternity unit taking photos of babies who are stillborn or having their life support withdrawn. Now I know this sounds pretty confronting, but for the families she helps, these are very precious photos. **I should warn you this episode covers topics you may find upsetting, especially if**

you've been affected by the loss of a baby, but her work is so important I hope you'll stay with me.

I started by asking Cheryl, "What do you need to cope with the emotional demands of this work?"

Cheryl Johnson: A huge heart and compassion. I mean you can walk into a room and the pain is almost tangible as you open that door, and that's really hard. It's the emotion; what do you say? And a lot of people say, "Oh, I couldn't do that", and sometimes it can actually be a little uncomfortable how grateful they are to you, when you think all that's going on for them, and they can't thank you enough.

Georgie Vestey: What is for you a really good session?

Cheryl Johnson: I had one family that I took photographs for, it was a traveller family, and literally there must have been a line outside the door of about 50 people all wanting pictures dressed in their finery. For me, that was quite unusual, because everyone looked at the camera and smiled, which is not the norm for these sessions; but for this family, everyone wanted a picture with this little one.

Then there are some families that have that USB and maybe they never, ever look at them, and that's absolutely fine. But what about 20 years down the line? If mum regretted it, she can go and have a look then. I've taken photographs of babies and mum's not seen the baby.

Georgie Vestey: Because she's chosen not to see the baby?

Cheryl Johnson: Yes, and it's quite unusual in those circumstances. I did have one quite recent. Dad said, "We'll have the photos", and dad was there, but bless him, he wouldn't be in the photos in case mum did decide to look and then felt bad that she wasn't there. So he stopped himself being in the photos, which I thought was an amazing thing to do. So, if she was ready one day, she wouldn't feel bad or that she missed out on something by not being in them.

Georgie Vestey: Talk to me about the families, the different reactions families have depending on the circumstances of the death. If it's been an unexpected death, when you walk into that room, does it feel very different?

Cheryl Johnson: Yes, then normally it's shock, numbness, very little speech; not emotional. It's very unusual to go into a room and they'll be crying, like sobbing. There may be the odd tear and that kind of thing, but most of the time it's silence and they're hard. It's like a disbelief sort of thing; it's not sunk in for them yet.

Whereas a family that have had a diagnosis that baby has a condition non-compatible with life, they're much more accepting and they've planned things. You can get in a room and there'll be a little mini shrine of bits and bobs they've brought along, and that's completely different. They're almost a happy occasion because they're getting time now with this baby. It's completely one end of the spectrum to the other.

Georgie Vestey: Are you ever surprised by the reaction, the grief reaction you get from some parents?

Cheryl Johnson: Sometimes there might be a slight bit of tension. I've been there when the parents are actually not together anymore. Sometimes I get police cases, the police are outside the door and the parents are not allowed to be in or touch the baby, and we take photos for them.

Georgie Vestey: That must be so hard.

Cheryl Johnson: Yeah. Some people can be possibly rude. I had a situation where I was actually really quite taken aback. Dad was so rude to me, and the dad said, "How long is this going to take?" and I said -- so straight away you pick up there's an issue here and he obviously does not want it to be very long-winded. So fibbing, I said, "Oh, about ten minutes", and he went, "Make it five".

He was obviously well-spoken, very sort of impressive looking; I think he was used to being in charge. He was completely out of his depth and their baby was having life support withdrawn, but mum you could see desperately wanted the pictures and the nurse had said to her, "Do you want skin to skin?", and she said, "Yes", and he said, "No". So we went in to do the pictures and literally, I was barely there five minutes, and he went, "That's enough".

The next day I get a phone call from the same unit again. So I went back, and I said, "Is little one still here with us?" and they said, "Yeah and she actually looks better

today". I said, "It wouldn't be the norm, but as I'm here, maybe pop in and ask if they wanted one or two more, because I can do that easily". She came back and said, "Yeah, come in".

Dad wasn't actually in the room when I walked in, but the two sets of grandparents were there with mummy and I said, "Oh, hello" and she said, "Oh thank you so much". She thought I'd come back, and I said, "That's okay". He walked in the door and said, "What are you doing in here? Get out!", and I was like "Oh", and the sister said, "She's here to take photos as mummy asked".

She sort of stood in front of the door like she's not going anywhere, bless, and these photos were so much nicer. You could see mum almost, she didn't say anything, but it was like, "Thank you", the look, and I can put up with that rude man because that mum has got what she wanted.

Georgie Vestey: What she needs. Do you think also with some fathers, they're trying misguidedly to protect their partners from what they see as it becoming more emotional. That thing about having skin on skin, they're fearful of there being some form of attachment and therefore if they can somehow prevent that, if they can somehow keep it away, that maybe it won't have as much impact?

Cheryl Johnson: One couple, they were told that they could stay at the hospital as long as they wanted. They had the bereavement suite and dad turned round and said to mum, "Well if we stay, you'll get more attached, so we need to go. I think we need to go today. Two days, that's been enough". But I can see that he thought he was helping her not get too attached, but the mum was like, "Oh, what? No". And then I've been to a neonatal unit where there was a little one, six months old, and no one has ever been to see the baby, and they're really harsh.

I recently was contacted by one of the bereavement midwives I know quite well, who had a mummy that lost a baby quite early, and I think just around the 20-mark. She didn't see the baby; she didn't want any pictures of the baby, but technically the hospital took medical photos for record.

Three years later, she was in counselling, and she was having a really bad time, and the thing was that she felt terrible that she didn't see him. She was having dreams and she couldn't see his face and all sorts of terrible things for her. So, she got on to

the bereavement midwife who knew the medical photographers took two pictures for the notes. She got in touch with me and said, "Is there anything you can do?", because they were horrible, clinical, mat, ruler, tiny little baby naked, and our team managed to put him in a heart-shaped blanket, so mummy had something.

Even though they were harsh clinical photographs, if that medical photographer had not took them, mummy would have nothing, and I received a really lovely letter from her saying that they're the most beautiful pictures she's ever seen.

Georgie Vestey: Have you ever taken photographs of a baby of somebody you've known?

Cheryl Johnson: No. I've met a family twice, which was really hard.

Georgie Vestey: Tell me about that.

Cheryl Johnson: I'd got a call and there was a request. It was a completely different hospital, and it was about 18 months apart. Mum had an unusual name and I'm thinking, "I know that name", and it was sticking with me, so I had a look back through records and I found mum. So I actually called the hospital back and said, "I've met this family before. Can you just speak to them and check with them that they're happy for me to come, because it's me and it might bring up the whole thing...?" They actually said no, they would rather it be me.

That was tough because as I walked in, mum just gave me a hug and again, we didn't talk too much other than there were some little comments about the previous little one and a resemblance and things like that, but I actually think they felt comfortable with it being me, because they didn't have to say much, and I didn't have to talk too much. They sadly knew the process and how it works and what I was going to do. Mum remembered a picture I took before and she wanted to do the same one again, so we did that, which was lovely for them.

Georgie Vestey: Have you ever been with a mother when she's given birth on her own?

Cheryl Johnson: Yes. You do feel a little bit more. I'd probably maybe stay a little bit longer and chat a little bit, squeeze mummy's hand while I talk to her, that kind of thing, to try and show her that she's got some support.

I had a 15-year-old girl that had a concealed pregnancy delivered at home in the bathroom and it had to go to the coroner, because they didn't know, did the baby breath or not? Three weeks later, he came back from the post-mortem, and we did the pictures, and she was in the middle of her GCSEs. He was the most beautiful baby, and they're probably maybe the harder ones when they just look absolutely perfect like they're sleeping, and you can't believe that this beautiful child isn't going to wake up.

Georgie Vestey: What happens for you when you have had a really hard day? How do you bring yourself back to yourself; how do you come back to being you?

Cheryl Johnson: I'm lucky. I have two pain-in-the-backside teenage boys, men nearly, I'm lucky to have that. But it is normal life, you can't carry it around forever. So, in the hour and a half or so it takes me to get home, I'm normally back in my normal state and my husband might say to me, "You okay?", but that, "You okay", means, "Don't tell me", and I go, "Yeah. I'm fine. I'm really fine", and then he says, "Ah, that's good". He normally gives me a little squeeze and that's it, we get back to normality.

Georgie Vestey: So which are the deaths that affect you the most?

Cheryl Johnson: I got caught out, possibly a couple of years ago, and when I got caught out, it was the first -- both my sons have fairly unusual names and one is more unusual than the other, and it was the first time I had a baby with my son's name. It was like, I felt that in my chest. So, that was tough.

Then I've had one session which was extremely hard, but it's not the norm, where it was actually mummy having care withdrawn and we photographed baby on her chest. I have been in many neonatal units, but I've never been in an adult intensive care, and it was quite shocking. Then we have a team of digital retouchers that do amazing things. They took mummy's ventilator away and I couldn't believe what a beautiful woman she obviously was. The little one has this one photograph of him and his mum. So, that one was really hard.

I've been at sessions where both mum and baby have passed.

Georgie Vestey: How do you go into the room and be with a family when it's that situation?

Cheryl Johnson: Believe it or not, for me I'm quite a loud, outspoken, outgoing person and I just do the opposite; I just read from the people. There were two sets of grandparents and dad and I just walked in and touched his hand and waited for him to react. He squeezed my hand, so I left my hand there.

I don't, as a whole offer, condolences, purely because I know when I'm emotional, if someone offers me a condolence, it will probably set me off.

Georgie Vestey: When you talk about attending the deaths of babies who are having their life support turned off, what is it that the families want you to take then, is it the life and then the death?

Cheryl Johnson: 99% of the time, if a family have a baby that's alive, they don't want to consider pictures of the baby when the baby's died. Babies on maternity that are stillborn, they have no choice. However those pictures, if you ever see a baby on a ventilator and if it's a little one, you don't really see very much of them.

But once all that medical paraphernalia has been removed, they look so much more peaceful, but most of them don't want that. It's hard, because I normally will say, when the neonatal nurse calls or the doctor, "Have you mentioned the possibility of afterwards, because they can look so much more peaceful?" and they say, "Yeah, we've asked, but they're not keen".

Georgie Vestey: We see what we want to see.

Cheryl Johnson: Yeah.

Georgie Vestey: It's interesting, because this whole area of memorialising a child's death has become a much bigger and more accepted practice than it was, say 10 or 20 years ago. I'm mindful of the fact that parents are possibly asking for photographs of babies at younger and younger ages, but I'm curious with that, in a sense, how you train your volunteers, because it must be quite confronting.

I've seen some of the photographs that have been put on memorial sites; these are very young babies.

Cheryl Johnson: The 24-week plus, they're fully formed, and they just look small. We do training. We have videos and slideshows, and we have consent from family, so that's what we show the photographers. There's things to know when handling and moving a baby that might happen. So, I think more information is power.

Georgie Vestey: Tell me about what you think these photographs give a grieving family?

Cheryl Johnson: It is that tangible thing. My baby did exist; I went into hospital pregnant, but I didn't come home with a baby like everybody else, they think, normally does. And there's lots of mums that say they have this irrational fear, and I believe it's irrational, that they will forget what their baby looked like. But when that baby dies, the love doesn't die. The love is there forever, and it is in all of us.

Some may try and suppress it, and some will let it freely and I think those that are free with it are the ones that talk about it and process it and probably have a healthier experience all round. It's the ones that try and bury it in and pretend it's not there are the ones that suffer which is a shame.

Georgie Vestey: What would you like to say to people who maybe have a friend or a relative who's just lost their baby? How should we help them?

Cheryl Johnson: Talk to them and talk about their baby. I believe if they didn't want to talk about it, they would tell you. The thing of being, "Oh Karen and John across the road", "Oh you mean the couple that lost the baby?" They get a label and people are like, "Oh gosh, I wouldn't know what to say to them, so I won't say anything".

Talk to them; let them talk. Pretending it didn't happen because you don't want to upset them, that's a convenient thing, "Oh, I don't want to upset her, so I won't say anything". That's more about you, because you don't know how to react; and it's really hard, I get that, but just let someone talk.

Even if it's a nod and squeeze of a hand, you might not have to say anything, just let her get it out, and him; we forget dads. We forget dads and that's really bad, because dads grieve and dads are the, "Oh, I'm supposed to be the tough, strong guy and I've got to be supporting, there for mum", but dads grieve. They're there, sometimes silently suffering and grieving, so we shouldn't forget them as well.

Georgie Vestey: And maybe ask to see the photos?

Cheryl Johnson: Oh definitely. The amount of people that are so proud. There are people that have canvasses on their walls, there are people that have mouse mats, on their mugs and everything, and it's normal; because why wouldn't you have a picture of your child?

The way I look at it is, my 20 minutes, 30 minutes, 40 minutes or be it 2 hours of being a little bit uncomfortable in a difficult situation is nothing compared to what these families will go through for the rest of their life; and again, I can make a difference, I'm a photographer. I'm not going to change the world, but actually I think with these photos, I change that family's world and that's quite a powerful thing to do.

Georgie Vestey: My thanks to Cheryl Johnson and her fantastic team of photographers and if you want to know more, you can visit their website, remembermybaby.org.uk, or check out their [Facebook page](#) and you'll see for yourself just how much their work means to the families they help.

I also want to say a belated congratulations as, since this interview, Cheryl has been awarded a British Empire Medal for services to bereaved families, an award which in my view is incredibly well deserved.

As always, you'll find links on our website, deadhonest.com, and if you'd like to leave us a review, well that would be amazing. It really helps others find their way to us. So, until next time...



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