

Title: **Episode 6. Behind closed doors**

Speakers: Georgie Vestey, Dead Honest & Louise Pye, Former Family Liaison Officer

Interview Transcription

Lou Pye: I've seen everything from collapse to aggression, shock, obviously lots of sadness, but then also certain people being oblivious, and generally I'm talking about children. So, you'll be dealing in one room with compounded grief, but actually the children are in a different room playing and asking, "What's for tea?" because they have no knowledge of what's actually happening.

Georgie Vestey: I'm Georgie Vestey and this is Dead Honest, a podcast where we talk honestly about death.

Every week we hear news reports about a family grappling with the aftermath of some devastating tragedy. It might be the murder of a child, a fatal accident or a terrorist incident, but the thing that unites them is this phrase we hear in the media time and again, "Specialist officers are supporting the family at this time".

This week I'm speaking with Lou Pye who, until recently, was one of those specialist officers, a police Family Liaison Officer or FLO for short. Lou has spent much of the last 20 years working as the contact point between the family and these police investigations. As a highly regarded detective and deeply compassionate person, she was absolutely made for this job, but there was one thing that really surprised me when we spoke.

You'd think that such a demanding and valuable role would be well paid, but you'd be wrong. FLOs not only have to volunteer for this role but are expected to perform it alongside their other police duties. So, I started by asking her why was she drawn to this work?

Lou Pye: Having joined the police at the age of 18, I was very much interested in victim care and certainly for me, it's more about looking after the victims of crime than it is apprehending the suspects.

Georgie Vestey: But it's a curious role, because on the one hand you are there to support the families, but your real primary role is as an investigative role, isn't it, that you're there to really be the eyes and ears for the police investigation inside that family?

Lou Pye: Yeah, absolutely. Our primary role is that of an investigator and that has to be very clearly explained to any family we work with. We are supportive to the family, but that's a secondary role and that might sound quite harsh. But I think once it's explained to a family, they'll understand what that means. So, it's helping identify motive, it's helping identify potential suspects, it's helping identify potential witnesses or it might just be helping to identify the person that's died.

Georgie Vestey: Do you remember the first family that you went to as a Family Liaison Officer?

Lou Pye: Yes, I do. Thinking back, and I think like anything you do for the first time, it's always very anxious to make sure you do it right. So yeah, I certainly remember working with this particular family who had suffered the death, a murder of somebody.

Georgie Vestey: Do you remember what it was like going into that family for the first time?

Lou Pye: Oh, awful!

Georgie Vestey: Talk me through it.

Lou Pye: Awful from the point of view of nervousness, the thought of what are we going to say, how are we going to say it, what reactions, trying to think ahead. Within grief, you just can't prejudge how someone's going to react.

So, the first thing we would do is to go and introduce ourselves as to who we are, what we will do for them, when we will next see them, what information we can get for them, asking what their immediate questions are and just making sure we deliver on what we promise, but not promising anything that's not realistic. So, managing those expectations of what we can and can't do is really, really vital.

Georgie Vestey: Are you always welcomed with open arms?

Lou Pye: No, not always. Obviously, we're a representation of what's happened. Sometimes families that we work with aren't very welcoming of the police in general, therefore there is an added edge to their conversations to us. So you always have to think a sentence head. You always have to analyse every term and every word that you use to make sure you don't unwittingly cause offence.

I have learned the hard way, don't try and second guess how grief can manifest itself. It's not to take things personally; if someone is shouting and screaming at you, to remind yourself that's grief, that's not because you're not doing your job properly, that's because that family member is dealing with probably the worst thing that's ever happened to them.

Georgie Vestey: Do you get involved in that role telling families that their family member has died, or is that a role that's already been performed by another colleague?

Lou Pye: Normally, it's already been performed by a colleague, because we would normally only get asked to be used as a Family Liaison Officer once the death had been confirmed. Occasionally, often with head injuries where someone doesn't die immediately, then on those occasions we can be present with the family; or, if someone's missing and later found dead we can be involved, but it's unusual.

Georgie Vestey: But that must be an extraordinary role to have, because you have information that you know is going to change that family's life forever. Have you ever been in that situation where you've had to communicate that information to a family?

Lou Pye: Oh yes, I have and it's difficult and it's horrible. You can't change what's happened. The people need to know what's happened and it's being quite honest and direct to deal with that with them, but then support them in the needs that they'll have directly afterwards.

Georgie Vestey: And what are those needs; what do those needs tend to be for those families?

Lou Pye: Oh, they vary dramatically. So, some people will want time alone, other people will want people with them, some people will say nothing; it's completely varied. I certainly wouldn't be comfortable leaving anyone on their own after

delivering that sort of message. That said, you have to be respectful of their wishes and if they say, "I'm okay, I need some time; let me deal with this, leave me alone", then who are we to say that's not the right reaction.

So we'll offer support, we'll offer help, we'll offer getting the right people involved, whether that be friends, neighbours, family members, GP, whoever it may be, but ultimately it has to be the family's choice.

Georgie Vestey: Do you accompany families when they do viewings?

Lou Pye: Sometimes, yes.

Georgie Vestey: How important do you think is viewing for a family?

Lou Pye: I think it's very important that we never tell a family whether to do it or not to do it. I think we're often asked, it's very, very common that we're asked, "Do you think I should?" My answer will always be, "I can't answer that. What I can do is tell you what to expect. I can go and look first, I can then come out and tell you exactly what you'll see, exactly what the temperature of the room is, what the décor of the room is, how many steps there are. I can tell you everything to prepare yourself for what you are going to see, but it has to be your choice". So I will never suggest to a family whether they should or shouldn't.

Georgie Vestey: I'm curious to know, though, because of your exposure to that, do you find people generally are happier that they have viewed a body, than experienced it as a regret that they haven't?

Lou Pye: From my experience, as traumatic and difficult as it is, families often say, "I'm glad I did it". Even though it had a massive impact on them, and it is extremely difficult for them to do, more people have said they're glad they did than glad they didn't. But I don't want that to be indicative of that being my suggestion of what to say, because it is very, very individual.

Georgie Vestey: The other thing I imagine that you might be involved in is the recovery of people's personal possessions. How important is it, do you think, to return those items back to a family? What others may see as really incidental clothes or whatever, how important is it for a family to get those items back?

Lou Pye: Extremely important, but again it's about choice. So we will, at the point where we can return items of property to a family, we need to tell them what we've got, we need to tell them what condition it's in, we need to give them choice about whether they would like it cleaned or not, because in some circumstances something might be damaged in some way; and I think ultimately, we need to return it in a really sensitive manner.

So, you watch a telephone programme and something's given back to a family member in an exhibit bag and that's just not appropriate at all; it has to be done in a very careful way. So, we have in the past used memory boxes. We get a memory box of a relevant size, we put whatever the item of property in it in a way that's really respectful, we give it back to the family and then they chose at what point to open the box.

They know what's in there, they know what it looks like, they may have been shown photographs of what it is and then when they're ready and it's the right time for them, they can then open the box. That to me is really important, to give that family control. If the box gets put in the corner of the room and left for a week, so be it; that's the family's choice.

Georgie Vestey: Which are the families that you most remember, and why have they left such a strong impression on you?

Lou Pye: So the families that either were extremely visually traumatised by what had happened, or alternatively very quiet, very drawn and needed more help, I think, probably are the families that stand out for me the most.

Georgie Vestey: Do you have for yourself deaths that you really dread having to tell families about?

Lou Pye: Yeah. I think for me, and it's not uncommon amongst the colleagues I work with, it's children. I'm sure that doesn't surprise you to hear, and I think that fear greatly increased once I had children as well, because of that personal connection you make to being a parent and what being a parent feels like.

There's one in particular that actually caused me to have a break for a short while. The case was a child that had been murdered, and the child was the same age as my child at the time, my son, and it was my son's birthday.

For me, just that personal connection between that age of child on a day that I was celebrating as my son's birthday, but another family had just lost their child, just made me need a break from it. I'd been doing it for quite a while at that point and I just needed to sort of come away, take stock, sort of build my barriers back up, build my resilience back up and then start again.

Georgie Vestey: I can imagine, because of the intimacy of that relationship that it's quite hard to detach yourself at the end of the day. How do you do that?

Lou Pye: It is difficult, because you work with families for weeks, months, sometimes years, and you're speaking to them about the hardest things that they've ever experienced. So, I think it's really important for that family to become self-sufficient and you not to be part of that. They didn't know you before the incident. So for me to be able to walk away from my role of working with them, I need to be confident that they've got all the support that they needed.

Georgie Vestey: Have you ever had families you've really not wanted to walk away from?

Lou Pye: I'll be honest, yes. There are some families that had you have met them on a holiday, you probably would have stayed friends; but I think it's really important that you remember that you've got a role to perform. Now, that's not meant to sound callous, that's meant to sound professional; to keep your own boundaries in place and to maintain your own resilience to what you're doing, that you have to be able to remember that you wouldn't have met them had it not been for whatever the sad incident that happened, you wouldn't have known them.

Georgie Vestey: So what would you say to the families and friends of people who have been in that situation where you as a FLO are there with the family? What advice would you give to them about coming forward?

Lou Pye: Families become isolated, because people don't know what to say, so they say nothing. The friends and relatives and neighbours might be thinking they're

being respectful, but some families want to talk about it and for me, it's about a choice. Talk to them, talk normally, talk in the way that you would, respectful of the circumstances, but don't avoid them.

Something as straight forward as offering to make a cup of tea, bringing a meal, asking how they are today; it's a bit like if I relate it back to children, often my experience has been that families will try and shield children from knowing what's happening, because shielding them might actually not work, particularly in the days now that we've got social media and they can read the news on their phones. They hear playground gossip; they hear comments from social media. It doesn't mean they're always true, but it will have an impact. So actually involve them as part of the family.

Georgie Vestey: I can imagine since you started doing this role in 1999, that social media has played a fairly significant or had a fairly significant impact on your role. Is that something you'd agree with?

Lou Pye: Yes, absolutely. It's predominantly because the speed at which information goes into the public domain. We've had cases where we've sadly found someone that's died, we haven't formally identified them, and people are already setting up Facebook sites, Rest in Peace, and naming them when the family haven't even been told that it's them yet, which is just so damaging and there's no need for it, I don't think.

So social media has its place, absolutely, but working with families means we just have to pre-empt what we can and inform families very early on of what we can and can't control, to minimise the impact on them.

Georgie Vestey: And what's the least rewarding part of your work?

Lou Pye: Probably the ignorance of people underestimating how difficult it is to work with a family, which is probably not what you expected me to say!

Georgie Vestey: I'm surprised by that. Do you mean from your colleagues?

Lou Pye: People that haven't done the role don't necessarily appreciate just how difficult it is. So for example, I've mentioned that we volunteer for this above our day job. So if you can imagine, a family liaison officer will leave their day job and the

caseload that they may have with that, which is also very important, then work with a family, but quite often they then have to juggle both.

So I think if it was a bit more known of, what we did with families, the pressure we're under and the amount of time and energy it took, then perhaps there'd be a little bit more awareness of the importance of the role, the recognition of the role and the support for the role.

Georgie Vestey: Talk to me about the type of cases which, if they knew what you had to deal with, they might understand those demands better.

Lou Pye: So we're going to see a family with perhaps one very small bit of information you need to give them, which would take ten minutes, but two hours later you've come out, because the day you visited the family, they've taken you to the bedroom of the person that's been murdered and shown you around. They've pulled out baby photos, locks of hair, footprints of the person that's been murdered and shown you with raw emotion how it's affected them.

You can't just leave after the ten minutes that you've needed; you have to be respectful for all the other things that the family need to talk to you about at that point. So when you've come back and someone says, "Why did it take you so long; you were only going for ten minutes?" that's the ignorance I mean. And I think unless you've experienced that and sat in a room with that almost tangible grief, you can't appreciate how much energy it takes to actually do that well. It's extremely demanding.

Georgie Vestey: So what skills do you need to be a good FLO?

Lou Pye: For me, the most important skill is communication, all forms of communication, speaking, listening, talking, writing, and adapting your communication style to the need of the person you're speaking to. You need to be very compassionate and sensitive in the way that you do that.

Something as obvious as, if we're going to see a family on a particular day and we have no choice. It's Mother's Day coming up quite soon. If we were dealing with a family who had lost the mother, then it would be really important to remember that Mother's Day is probably not the best day to visit.

So it's just thinking all the time about what you're doing, why you're doing it and are you doing it in the most appropriate way for that family.

Georgie Vestey: Can I ask you, when was the last time you cried?

Lou Pye: With the last major incident that I was fully involved with. It tends to be the mass fatality incidents, because there are times where the families are together. Just the raw emotion, that accumulative group of families in one room, and the impact that you see people experiencing, it just brings home how lucky you are and how tragic a situation you're involved with really.

Georgie Vestey: So what happens to you when you have had a particularly intense and tricky day with a family? What do you do to bring yourself back to yourself?

Lou Pye: For me, if it's something I need to talk about, I'll speak to a handful of people that do the role too that weren't involved but will understand. If I didn't want to talk but I just needed time to process, then normally I would just take myself off somewhere. It's almost like, dust myself down, deep breath and then move on to the next thing. Particularly with being a mum myself, coming home and having to go into the normal routine of being a parent to children at home, you need to be able to do that in a way that doesn't impact on them.

Georgie Vestey: What do you notice in yourself when that pressure starts to build? How does it manifest itself with you?

Lou Pye: Irritability probably. My children would call it my parking face. By that, they mean when they were younger and I used to be in the car with them trying to park, I would ask them to be quiet, because I was trying to concentrate on parking. So I'd go quite stern, and I'd go very quiet and solemn faced. That used to be known as my parking face. So now, if I'm in a bad mood it's, "Mum's got her parking face on".

So I think irritability and also quite often tiredness, because you are often dealing in long hours, and emotionally the tiredness gets to you, because of the thinking ahead and the communication skills that you're using can be quite tiring.

Georgie Vestey: What do you feel the impact of this role has been on you?

Lou Pye: It just reminds you constantly how not to take life for granted and to appreciate everything you've got, because it can be changed in an instant.

Some of the first stories you hear with families is they relive the last time they spoke to that person, and often it might have been after an argument or they meant to ring them that night and had forgotten or whatever it was, and the guilt that can sometimes come with those thoughts, that aren't rational as such, because they didn't know what was going to happen, they couldn't have pre-empted it, but naturally that's what you think.

So I won't leave the house on argument. I'm probably a bit gushy with my family, because I know how fragile life is.

Georgie Vestey: What is the most rewarding part of your work?

Lou Pye: I think for me, whatever has happened has already happened; you can't change that. If you could that would be wonderful, but you can't. So if you can work with a family to make sure that within the choices they make, they have as much control back as possible, then you know you've made a difference.

In such a horrendous set of circumstances, you have actually walked with them through that process, and you've made it bearable. You're never going to make it good; you're never going to make it pleasant; you're never going to make it enjoyable, but you might make it bearable and that to me is a massive thing to do for a family.

Georgie Vestey: My thanks to Louise Pye for sharing her experience as a Family Liaison Officer. Since leaving the police, Lou has recently taken on a new role as Head of Family Engagement with the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch.

If you'd like to offer your thoughts about the programme, then do get in touch; I'd love to hear from you. Just go to our website, deadhonest.com, and you'll find my contact details there.

Until next time...



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