

## Sally Mays: Mum tells of fight for justice after a tragic death

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'AMAZING SENSE OF HUMOUR': Sally Mays.

*In an exclusive interview, the parents of Sally Mays, who died just hours after being turned away from a Hull mental health unit, talk to Health Reporter **Allison Coggan**.*

A twinkle in her eye, she was blessed with comic timing and could light up a room with a comment the right side of risqué.

Sally Mays was never content with second best. For her, it was all or nothing.

A gifted violinist, she insisted on learning the clarinet and piano. It wasn't enough to play women's rugby, so she took up running and boxing. She learned to ice skate – not to master turns and jumps but so she could join Kingston Diamonds Ladies Ice Hockey Team.

While her parents, Angela and Andy, lazed by the pool on holiday, Sally would do 150 lengths – and she did it every day.

But she paid the heaviest of prices for pushing herself so hard.

Sally was just 22 when she was found dead at her home in Derringham Court, off Spring Bank West, on July 25 last year. Knowing she was at risk of taking her own life, Sally had pleaded with Humber NHS Foundation Trust to help her. Staff turned her away.

Yesterday, a coroner issued a narrative verdict, stating the failure to admit Sally by two nurses in the Humber Foundation Trust's crisis team had constituted neglect.

Mrs Mays said Sally showed signs of anxiety when she was at primary school and began putting herself under pressure to be the best.

"She didn't want to be in the middle, she wanted to be the top," she said.

Sally developed an eating disorder while she was a student at Hymers College and was admitted to the West End inpatient unit in Hessle. With little improvement after 11 months and her discharge imminent, her parents sought a second opinion from an international specialist in eating disorders, based in Edinburgh.

He diagnosed Sally with food avoidance emotional disorder, a condition he had first identified to describe how emotional problems can lead sufferers to avoid food. Sally was admitted to a specialist eating disorder unit in London for three months before moving to Stafford for ten months.

Her battle with mental illness took its toll on her parents and older brother Ben. "We were just hanging by a thread," said Mrs Mays. "There was a time when she was in Hull Royal Infirmary when I took her out for lunch and had to push her in a wheelchair.

"She was so weak, she couldn't even walk."

Sally tried to return to sixth form but could not cope and had to return to Stafford, where she stayed until she was 18 and was transferred to Mill View Court, the inpatient unit for adults run by Humber NHS Foundation Trust.

Crucially, now 18 and diagnosed with emotionally unstable personality disorder, Sally decided her parents should not be involved in her care. Staff told them they could no longer share information with them. Their own daughter and her serious problems were no longer their business.

Sally moved into a flat close to her parents' home in Anlaby but continued to see them, often staying over four nights a week before she moved back home full-time.

Despite this, the trust considered Sally "estranged" from her family, even though hostility and unstable relationships were main characteristics of her condition.

When Mrs Mays would call to alert them to alarming changes in Sally's behaviour, she was confronted by the brick wall of confidentiality.

Throughout her illness, Sally continued to show flashes of brilliance. Her parents recall one concert, watching their daughter lose herself in a 20-minute violin solo without the aid of sheet music. "She had music in her soul," said Mrs Mays.

"She had an amazing sense of humour and she could walk into a room where she knew no one and, with one comment, she could light up the place. She knew just how far to push it."

They remember how, when well, she had gone to Hull College to study art and achieved a distinction. Despite having no A-levels, she was accepted to study psychology at the University of Hull through the clearing system in 2012.

But it was too much. Determined to immerse herself in student life, she joined sports clubs and groups.

"She wanted to experience everything," said her father. "But she burned herself out in about six weeks."

Sally got jobs, working at Willerby Manor and then Waitrose. She moved out of her parents' home again and got another flat in Derringham Court.

But her condition was unpredictable and exhausting for everyone. She could change from being happy and talkative in her parents' kitchen to being monosyllabic and withdrawn once she reached home minutes later. Mr Mays said: "With something like bipolar, there are long periods of behaviour, so a high or low mood could last several weeks. With this disorder, Sally's mood could change several times in the space of a day."

They learned when to back off and when to intervene. But they were always there.

On the night of her death, her family were unaware of the extent of Sally's difficulties. However, her mother had been concerned enough to contact Humber NHS Foundation Trust. She was told: "We are aware of the problem and are dealing with it."

If her parents had been told Sally had been refused admission, they would have realised she was in serious danger.

An ambulance took 99 minutes to reach Sally – by which time she was dead. Her parents would have got to her in seven.

In the 15 months since Sally's death, her parents have thrown themselves into their quest for justice, demanding answers from the trust through Freedom of Information requests, scouring health reports, checking and cross-referencing statements and phone records.

"We owe this to her," said Mrs Mays. "We owe it to all those people who have lost their lives in similar tragic circumstances before Sally and for their families who, for whatever reason, couldn't pursue it. And we owe it to everyone who will come after Sally if we don't do this."

"I once said to Sally that I would be the last man standing when it came to supporting her and that I would never give up. That is still true today."