

BUILDING ON THE STRONG POINTS

Stephanie Cornwall talks to Efreem Brynin about why he has given up a career at the frontline of the FIS sector to help tackle emotional and mental health issues brought about by bereavement



At 18 years old, Efreem Brynin was celebrating his landmark birthday year, becoming a parent for the first time, and starting out on his career within the moveable partitions sector.

As an estimator, he then earned the grand total of £7K per year. Over the next 15 years, after stints as a sales manager, area sales manager and sales director for the likes of Unlock Partitions, Alca Belcas, and Citywalks, he'd worked his way through the ranks to become director at Stylfold/Style Partitions, where he's worked for the past 12 years.

So, almost 30 years after entering the industry, what has persuaded him to hang up his hat and embark on a completely new path, championing mental health and bereavement support for men?

"Efreem said it's the desire to have a break after an emotional five years, change his work life balance, and use his experiences to help others to manage their response to a bereavement through a joint physical and mental health approach."

In 2016 Efreem entered the public spotlight when he battled through the Ecuadorian jungle in Channel 4's SAS: Who Dares Wins show. Then aged 44, he was the oldest contestant to take part in the show.

A year before, Efreem's 22-year-old son, Lance Corporal James Brynin, was shot dead. He had been on his second tour of Afghanistan and was part of the brigade reconnaissance when he was shot by Corporal of Horse Mark Kelly, who said he believed James was a Taliban insurgent. James was posthumously awarded a MID (Mention in Despatches) medal for gallantry by the Queen and had already won a NATO Award and two medals for his two tours of Afghanistan.

Entering the show, and putting himself through the grueling trials, enabled Efreem to feel closer to his son and experience

how James would have felt in his profession, how he would have gone about his business and connect with him on an emotional level, said Efreem.

During the making of the show, he experienced the first symptoms of what was later diagnosed as prostate cancer, for which he has since received treatment and is now in remission.

It's a series of events that would have broken the spirit of many. But Efreem believes we must learn from our experiences and use them to shape our future and those of others. Through the SAS: Who Dares Wins show, he met Dan Cross, a commander in the following series, and former UK Special Forces member Ollie Orlin, and between them they co-edited a co-founder of StrongMen.

"Dan is a co-founder of StrongMen. He works in IT, so a completely different industry to me," said Efreem. "We got put together, if you like, because we have a similar type of story. Dan lost his wife - she was murdered about three years ago. He has two young kids and is just a little bit younger than me. It was his physical and past physical fitness and mental fitness together. Dan has had more of an issue with mental health and I've probably had more of experience with my physical health."

Because both had been through the bereavement process, and used a similar coping mechanism, they decided to draw on their experience, as well as the challenge and camaraderie they'd experienced during the making of the SAS: Who Dares Wins show, as a concept for the non-profit organisation, with aims and ambitions to tackle emotional and mental health issues brought about by suffering from bereavement.

The StrongMen team, made up of Efreem, Dan, Ollie and Alexandra Wells who previously worked within the child

and adolescent mental health sector, focuses on early intervention and offers the opportunity for men aged 18 to 55 to speak out about their problems. It provides weekend breaks for men based around physical activities, along with talks and discussions from experts on the importance of looking after your body through areas such as nutrition, leisure and exercise to aid recovery and speaking to people about their thoughts and problems.

"We are all slaves to our phones, our emails, and this doesn't actually help anything in regard to how things effectively roll up inside you. You know what it is like - if someone can get hold of you for half an hour. It is like the world is going to end," said Efreem. "So what I do, and what I have always done, is leave my phone at home and go off and do what I want to do. Often that is a run [even though I HATE running]. But it is just nice to go out and do one-one can disturb that. The most ridiculous thing I see is when people go out running, they stop and take a phone call. We all get soaked into that culture where we think I have to take this call. Well, no, you don't."

Providing an outlet

Too many people have a misunderstanding of what mental health means, said Efreem. "Mental health and mental illness are very different things. But they can stem from similar things, and from people not doing anything about them. In that way it's the same as the physical side. If you have a minor leg injury for example and don't do anything about it, it is going to get worse and worse. It will affect your hamstring and the way you walk, until eventually you have a major problem because you didn't do anything about it when it was a relatively small thing."

Efreem said he went back to work as soon after James' death, which many bereaved people do as a way of getting

back into a routine. In that sense, more awareness and understanding from employers can help the healing process, as well as enabling employers themselves to get the best from their workers by ensuring they heed the early warning signs and can make provisions accordingly. Men are also less likely to open up than their female counterparts.

"I never speak to my family about my work, or really share that side of things. When James, our son, was killed in Afghanistan, as head of our family I took on board everybody else's wellbeing just to make sure we made it through the day, the week, the month, the year. What it didn't do was give me the chance to offload and it's very difficult to know who to offload to, even when you want to."

Efreem attended a support group. "The only thing I found useful to me was to sit in a room full of people who understood the process because they had been through a similar type of thing. There were 15 men - dads, brothers and others - who would sit and talk about what had happened to their relative and how they got to be there. It was like somebody had just taken the lid off and let you just talk about them."

"Often, when you've lost someone, particularly a child, no-one really knows the process involved and don't really know what to say. They often come up with things like 'I've got better', 'I'm a great healer' and 'he wouldn't want you to do that' - all these things where it's not really the right thing to say but they don't know any different."

StrongMen seeks to provide situations where a group of men who have all suffered a bereavement can go away to a completely different environment, where physical activity is combined with the opportunity to talk and bond with others in the same group. The latest two-day expedition to Sweden at the start of April involved 20 men, of a variety of ages and backgrounds, from civilian and military sources, and whose loss of a loved one weren't just recent, but sometimes from several years ago.

"What we are trying to do is talk to people in a different setting, offering them just support but understanding. We're not just talking the talk, we've walked the walk. That is the whole ethos behind StrongMen," said Efreem.

"We take people away, take them into the Great Outdoors, and get them to do stuff. We are doing Sweden and we are doing zip-wiring. We want to offer them a kinship, a kind of brotherhood. Hopefully the support will then go forward from there - they will then make friends with a few other people and have that shared experience."



Spreading the message in industry

StrongMen formed in May last year, as a CIC (Community Interest Company), and in the process of transitioning into a full charity. Its next steps will be to seek corporate backing, as well as further fund-raising campaigns, and raise awareness of its offering.

To date, funding has been raised through a Lottery Grant and various fund-raising campaigns. "To push it a further year we need to get more interest, more funding, more awareness," said Efreem. "People from other charities have told us we are more or less unique. Although you have other mental health things like Moverment and The Samaritans, they're geared at a different side of things. Ours is pretty much a niche market - the bereavement side of things."

In December, the StrongMen team met McClear Construction in Ulverston, where Dan and Efreem gave a presentation, told their stories and talked about the signs of mental health, and physical wellbeing.

"We sat in a site hub at the ICB office. We had steel fixers, ground workers, dryliners, all kinds of men coming in in their big builder's boots, but you could have heard a pin drop. It was amazing how many of them came up to us afterwards and said 'I've got a friend who has those stories and similar things'."

Efreem said it was important to make people aware that bereavement and mental health are not "scary subjects", to be able to recognise symptoms and know what kind of approach to take. With this in mind, StrongMen is looking to meet more companies within the fitness and interiors sector, to offer a support service to employees and employees' allies.

"Few people know what to do or what to say to a bereaved person, yet every company is likely to have to deal with the situation at some point, while stigma and reluctance to open up are barriers that will need to be broken down, particularly in the fitness and interiors sector, because the location of work projects is continually changing, men are effectively going for 'hire' and a feeling of outside could develop the best."

"In terms of people who work with contractors, you don't get many nowadays who are as brutal as they could be years ago, often shouting and swearing, which is a very good sign. But that doesn't mean they are ready to provide that back-up and support for staff to open up - they are generally aware they need to, but it's not very good."

Offering people the physical and mental link-up through StrongMen's activities could be a valuable tool for many employers in our industry, as well as enabling them to get a better understanding of how to respond to bereaved work colleagues. Those who visit the StrongMen team or feel that demonstrated that there is plenty of empathy and understanding within the sector, and interested in what StrongMen can offer. Efreem himself will also continue to work as a consultant in the fitness and interiors sector, so is not entirely hanging up his hat.

"If you look after people, in any respect, you will get more out of them in the long term," said Efreem. "That can be in terms of vitality, life balance, what is expected from them, getting them together in groups to do things. It's all based on awareness. If you have a good boss, who has good empathy and understanding, you will remember that, who ever you end up working for."

FIN OUT MORE

FIS has created a dedicated website page focussing on Mental Health in Construction and will be leading the social campaign #BuildersBereavement. To find out more visit www.strongmen.org/about-us/builders-bereavement

Any readers wish to contact Efreem to talk at arranging a talk they can contact him through his website.