

## Obituary

Sidney Isador Briskin

Born 21.4.21 Bethnal Green, London

Died 10.2.10 Golders Green, London

Sidney Briskin was a distinguished social worker and a pioneer in the field of family therapy. He was one of the seven Founding Members of the Philadelphia Association (PA), the UK charity set up in 1964, with Dr. R. D. Laing as Chair, to support a radical departure from conventional and established psychiatric ways of understanding and responding to people in severe mental distress.

Sid overcame a horrific event of his early childhood, his father killing his mother and then killing himself when Sid was less than 2 years old. He was gifted and fortunate in being able to transform that trauma into intelligent engagement with, and profound compassion for, the suffering of others.

He trained and qualified as a social worker. A post-graduate social work student (JN) who met him in while doing her placement at the Family Welfare Association in 1959, said of him:

***“He transformed my life...*** I stayed on to work with the FWA as I felt I had come home, and this was due to Sid. He had the ability to really listen to what people were saying about the problems they were facing, combined with immense compassion and skill at helping them.”

He met Ronnie Laing in the early 60's (initially as a patient in psychoanalysis, later as a colleague) and accepted his invitation to be a founding member of the PA. Sid regarded his involvement with the PA, and particularly with the experimental residential community at Kingsley Hall (KH) in the east end of London, as the most challenging and significant period of his professional life. That work (voluntary, as the project was largely unfunded) was fuelled by an ethical conviction that the way we treat one another, starting with careful listening and relating with respect and non-intrusive care, deserved a higher priority than it was usually given.

Briskin intuitively understood Laing's existential-phenomenological, and ethical grounds for pointing to the need that any of us might feel, at crucial junctures, for a place to be when our very being felt in question; fractured; our lives falling apart; confused as to who we are and how to be, and not knowing where to turn.

A place more concerned with sensitive *being with*, than with *doing to*, and with how we treat each rather than 'treatment', could not be structured by hierarchy whereby those in distress were disempowered from finding their own way, in their own way and time.

Sid was enthusiastic about the proposed project and, indeed, set up the very first PA mini-community in his own home, in Willifield Way, NW11, taking in young people, who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic, into home.

While others (including Laing) had their doubts or flagged in their enthusiasm and determination to see their (more and/or less) shared idea put into practice, Sid went full steam ahead, found Kingsley Hall and participated in the negotiations which resulted in the Lester sisters (Christian pacifists and political activists, who had hosted Ghandi at KH in the early 1930's) leasing KH to the PA at a 'peppercorn' rent for 5 years.

Throughout the Kingsley Hall years (1965-1970), Sid was a rock of stability in turbulent times, a practical, attentive and kind man. The implicit epistemological anarchy of the experimental residential community was accompanied by considerable day to day anarchy in decision making and attending to necessary household matters. Had Sid a greater influence on the course of events, it likely would have been beneficial for all concerned. However, that's said with the benefit of the retro-spective-scope. While others often disagreed with Sid's approach or advice (as they/we all often did with each other), there was never any doubt of his whole-heartedness, integrity, kindness and a being grounded in common sense.

In the rough and tumble of PA politics and relationships, Sid resigned from the PA in 1973, but not before orchestrating a major fund raising event, with the help of Suzy Kendall, to raise money for a PA household in London.

Sid developed fairly severe Parkinson's Disease, in his late 70's, and was treated for lung cancer about 4 years ago (with the removal of part of one lung). Over that period, with the help of a close friend (JJ), he pursued his life long passions for music and the graphic and performing arts, attending events in London as well as travelling around the world, until illnesses made that impossible. He had some time in a hospice but left several months ago to return to live, and die, in his own home.

Obituary written by Dr. Leon Redler, Member (and former Chair) of The Philadelphia Association

(Sid was married and divorced before his involvement with the PA. There were no children of that marriage. He ex-wife died about 10 years ago.)