

In a courageous interview, the parents who lost their family tell

The tiny chapel was crammed with mourners. They squashed on to the stark wooden benches and stood shoulder to shoulder in the spaces between. The hundreds who couldn't fit into the building crowded the narrow country lanes outside.

They wore flowery frocks, colourful ties and bright suits. Nobody was dressed in black. Chloe Walker's funeral was to be a celebration of her life, a service every bit as effervescent as the young girl to whom they were saying goodbye.

Shortly before her coffin was about to be taken away, the undertaker whispered in the ear of Chloe's father John. There had been an incident, he said, and asked that everyone remain in the chapel until it had been resolved.

It was several moments before John and his wife Sharon realised what the incident had been – and hours until they learned of its full horrific impact. Taxi driver Derrick Bird had embarked on a gun-wielding rampage around the surrounding Cumbrian countryside.

At 10.20am that day he had shot his second victim, solicitor Kevin Commons, in Frizington,



by **Antonia Hoyle**

the tiny village where the Walker family live. For three hours, terrified local residents locked themselves in their homes lest they too should be subjected to Bird's seemingly random vendetta.

So it was hardly surprising that those attending Chloe's midday funeral were asked to remain inside, or that those waiting outside were quickly ushered away by police. But it is of scant comfort to Chloe's parents.

'What Bird did was unbelievable,' says John of the events on Wednesday, June 2. 'But from a personal perspective, I was saddened that not only had he ruined so many lives, he had stopped those who loved my daughter from being able to give her a proper a send-off.'

On any other day Chloe's funeral would have captured the attention of Cumbria, if not the nation. She had lost her life in a coach crash

on Monday, May 24, when a 49-seater coach taking Chloe home from school collided with a Honda Civic. One other pupil and the car's driver also died when the coach overturned, making headlines around the world.

It had been Chloe's 16th birthday on the day of the crash. What made her death even more poignant was the fact that her brother Jordan had died three years earlier, from a rare genetic disorder, aged just 15.

To lose one child is an unspeakable tragedy. To have two taken at such tender ages defies comprehension.

Yet this is the position that John and Sharon Walker find themselves in.

'When Jordan died we were devastated. It was Chloe who kept us strong. She pulled us through, and helped us learn to smile again,' says John.

'To lose her as well feels like our insides have been ripped out. We loved both children equally but this time around the grief is different. It is more painful. We had time to accept that Jordan was going to die. But Chloe went so suddenly and her death has made us incredibly angry and bitter.'

'Our children were wonderful people who had so much to offer. We have not only been robbed of them, but our future grandchildren as well. Why have our son and daughter been taken from us when there are so many evil people in the world that are allowed to live? It is too much to bear.'

John and Sharon certainly give the impression of a couple pushed to the brink of human suffering. It has been a week since they cremated their daughter. Both have barely slept.

Their voices are thick with emotion, their eyes swollen from crying. They are surrounded by more than 600 cards of condolence that cover the floors and line the walls of their five-bedroom home.

Chloe's bedroom is exactly as she left it. Her Primark clothes fill her wardrobe. An orange and cinnamon-scented candle sits by her bed and her beloved silver bangles hang off a butterfly hook on the wall. Jordan's room also remains untouched. There is a teddy bear, a carved wooden duck and a glitter ball, emblematic of a boy who, for all his disabilities, lived life to the full.

Jordan suffered some health problems from birth. 'He learned to speak

'Chloe adored Jordan and knew he was ill'

slower than his friends and had hearing problems, but doctors couldn't find anything seriously wrong,' says Sharon, 46. 'He could say Mummy, Daddy and biscuit. Still, he loved his bike and watching cartoons.'

'But as he got older he found it more difficult to do things like climb. He grew hyperactive and erratic, throwing plates around and trying to eat everything in sight, and he didn't understand what we said. When he was five we had to put him into a specialist school.'

When Jordan was seven, tests finally diagnosed him with Sanfilippo syndrome. It is a progressive and incurable childhood genetic disorder that disrupts sufferers' enzyme production, destroying their mobility and brain function. It affects around one in every 70,000 children, with most not living beyond their teenage years.

'When we were told it would kill Jordan we were devastated,' says John, 58. 'Nobody in our family had any genetic illnesses that we knew of, but it emerged that Sharon and I were both carrying the disease's dormant gene. Jordan was too ill to understand what was happening to him, and Chloe was too young, so we drew on each other for support.'

They vowed that however short Jordan's life would be, they would make the most of every moment. Weekends were spent picnicking on the Cumbrian coast or feeding the cows on the local farm.

Holidays were taken at Florida's



SUCH A LOSS: Chloe with John and Sharon and, below, Jordan on a holiday



Disney World, where Jordan delighted in holding Mickey Mouse's hand while his sister braved the rollercoasters with her dad.

'Chloe adored Jordan,' says John. 'She would lie beside him to watch the Jungle Book on television, and played with the cars in his toy garage.'

'As she grew up we explained that Jordan was ill and she understood that he needed more of our time.'

'She never complained of the attention we gave him. At Christmas time she would say that the only present she wanted was for her brother to get better.'

By the time he was 13 Jordan was reliant on a wheelchair. He had lost the ability to swallow and needed a tube to be fed. 'We adapted his bedroom so he could carry on living at home,' says Sharon.

Both John and Sharon carried on working; he as a steel erector at the nearby Sellafield nuclear plant, she as an administration manager in its offices. They sought refuge at Eden House Children's Hospice in Carlisle, where they stayed with Jordan when they needed respite, and were supported by a team of carers.

'As ill as Jordan was, he still had a sparkle in his eye and a cheeky smile,' says Sharon. 'He loved me singing Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star to him and massaging his hands.'

'Chloe helped us liquidise his favourite roast dinners. We read to him to try to keep his brain developing. But as the months passed he grew less mobile and struggled to breathe. We knew the end was coming.'

Jordan died at 2am on March 12, 2007. 'I was lying in bed when I realised I couldn't hear him breathe on the monitor we kept in our room,' says Sharon. 'We ran downstairs and I screamed as John called an ambulance. We knew he was gone and kissed him as we cried.'

Chloe, who was 12 at the time, had been woken by the commotion.

'When we told her he had died she didn't speak. She just sat on her bed and sobbed,' says Sharon. Yet over the coming months it was their

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of trying to cope with an unimaginably awful sequence of events

Their daughter died in a bus crash, just three years after they lost their son. Then, outside the church as Chloe's funeral began, Derrick Bird started shooting...

GRIEF TOO MUCH TO BEAR: Bright and popular bus crash victim Chloe Walker with her mother Sharon



NORTH NEWS PICTURES / ENTERPRISE NEWS PICTURES

daughter who gave them the will to carry on.

'She planted a kiss on our foreheads when she could see we were struggling,' says John. 'She was more of a support to us than we were to her but we realised that, for her sake, we needed to stay strong. She didn't talk about her brother much. If we began a conversation about him she would join in but generally she internalised her grief. She spent a lot of time in her room or curled up on her own on the sofa. I had counselling but she didn't want it.'

Remarkably, however, Chloe prospered as she entered her teenage years, growing into a bright and popular girl who enjoyed listening to the Black Eyed Peas on her iPod and watching American soap operas.

'She loved going to local music festivals with her friends and borrowing my Dior mascara,' says Sharon. 'She made a brilliant paella and a bacon and mushroom pasta dish.'

'She was an accomplished artist and painted stunning abstract pictures. Her ambition was to take a diploma in design engineering after she had finished her GCSEs, travel the world until she was 26 and then settle down and have children.'

'John and I promised to help her pay for the cream Mini she wanted

when she turned 17 if she studied hard. She was predicted A grades and enjoyed revising.

'Although we would never forget Jordan, we had learned to live happily as a family again. After her exams were over we were planning a holiday in Cuba to celebrate.'

The Walkers celebrated Chloe's birthday the preceding Saturday with a barbecue for 50 of their family and friends.

'We bought her a computer case and some earphones for her iPod for her birthday,' says John. 'As I waved her off on the Monday she said she loved me and smiled.'

It was 4.45 that afternoon when one of Chloe's friends called Sharon to tell her the coach Chloe took home from Keswick School had been in collision with a car on the A66 and that there had been at least one fatality.

She and John rushed to the nearby village of Braithwaite, where a Red Cross centre had been set up to tend to the injured.

'When we told medical staff we were Chloe Walker's parents they said she was alive,' recalls John.

In a tragic twist of fate, however, there had been another pupil called Chloe Walker on the coach, and it was she who had survived. Their

daughter had been struck on the forehead as the coach overturned and was killed instantly.

That evening John and Sharon identified her body in hospital.

'It felt as if I had been hit over the head, that there was a hole where my stomach had been,' says John.

'We had been able to prepare ourselves for Jordan's death. This was more difficult to accept. Even as I looked at Chloe I couldn't believe she was gone.'

Although an investigation into the crash, which also killed pupil Kieran Goulding, 15, and the car's driver

'She told us she wanted a colourful funeral'

Patrick Short, 68, is still ongoing, police believe Short was driving on the wrong side of the road when he collided with the coach.

'I like to think he had a reason for doing so,' says John. 'It is easier to think of it as an accident than careless wrongdoing.'

After Chloe's body was released, the Walkers took her body home for five days until the cremation. 'She looked so peaceful. We took it in

turns to sleep with her,' says Sharon. 'We still kept expecting her to walk in through the living-room floor, and give us a smile or a hug.'

'We missed her warmth, her humour and her kindness. Before she was cremated we dressed her in her favourite jeans, floral jumper and purple trainers.'

'Just a few weeks earlier she had said that if anything was to happen to her she wanted a colourful funeral. She had also told us that she would be famous when she died. Her comments came from nowhere and we shrugged them off at the time. Suddenly, they seemed eerily ironic.'

Nonetheless, they followed their daughter's wishes and requested that mourners wore bright clothes at the funeral, which took place at Distington Hall Crematorium near Workington.

Although both John and Sharon believe their children's spirits live on, neither has a strong faith to draw on. 'I was brought up a Catholic but I'm not sure what I believe any more,' says John. 'I like to think there is some kind of afterlife and that our son and daughter are looking after each other. Otherwise what a terrible, tragic waste their lives were.'

At the service, one of Chloe's friends gave a reading and after-

wards John and Sharon hosted a gathering at Frizington Social Club.

Yet the occasion was marred by the shooting spree, which culminated in Bird – who had lived just two miles from the Walkers – taking his own life. Like the rest of Cumbria, John and Sharon are struggling to come to terms with the atrocity.

'We live in a close community and I knew the gunman very well,' says John. 'He was a friend of a friend of mine. He seemed lovely, always smiling. I would never have believed he could have done something like this. His actions will always be imprinted on my mind.'

Yet the Walkers' primary concern must be to deal with their personal grief. It is an almost unimaginable task. Both their son and daughter's ashes are now buried together in their garden, surrounded by pink and white roses.

Nearby lie the charcoal remains of Chloe's 16th birthday barbecue, the reminder of a happy occasion that seems to the Walkers at once so recent and so desperately far away.

Additional reporting: Tom Hendry

● *At the Walkers' request The Mail on Sunday is to make a donation to the Eden House Children's Hospice*