

FOUNDATION VOICE

THE ARSENAL FOUNDATION HAS A LONG-STANDING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WILLOW FOUNDATION, WHICH ORGANISES SPECIAL DAYS OUT FOR SERIOUSLY ILL YOUNG PEOPLE.

David Williams, 37, from Welwyn Garden City, recalls a memorable trip to Emirates Stadium at the end of last season.

"I've had lots of ups and downs in life, been part of some dark times as a child and as a young adult, yet, it has been a terminal cancer diagnosis that has given me a clarity that puts everything into perspective. I'd been symptomatic for months prior and ignored it to the most part, passing it off as historical back pain. However, at the beginning of this year, I was admitted to Addenbrookes Hospital after months of excruciating neck pain. Two days into my stay, I was being readied for a brain biopsy to remove a cystic brain tumour that had filled with fluid. The surgeon who performed my operation, Stephen, also had the unenviable task of informing me that the operation performed on me wasn't successful and looked at me with regret and tears filled his eyes as he informed me it was 'highly unlikely' that I would get to walk my daughter Lily down the aisle nor would it be likely I would get to watch my son Henry, play football. I was devastated, but these are the cards I've been dealt and I insist on loving and enjoying the time that I have left.

Bob Wilson started the Willow Foundation in Welwyn Garden City so everyone here knows about it. It was my Isabel Hospice nurse, Sharon, who first told me about Willow's #SpecialDays out for the young and terminally



ill and that she had applied on my behalf for a #SpecialDay and that someone from the Willow Foundation would soon be in touch with me to discuss it further. It was all happening really quickly and before I could gather my emotions I was stood in Box 111 as a guest at the game against Leeds United in May – applauding Bob Wilson and the other Arsenal Legends from that era.

I had been to plenty of Arsenal matches but this one was very different. Earlier that week, during my initial call with Clare from Willow, it came up that I didn't own the most recent

Above: David at Emirates, ready for a very special day

Right: David, Adam and legendary left back Nigel

home shirt. Clare said that she'd like to get that to me in time for the game which I thought was an amazing gesture. Clare also contacted me the same week to inform me that I had been sent an email she was excited for me to open, as it was directly from the club itself. Arsenal had sent a personal video. It started at someone's legs before panning up, to reveal it was Eddie Nketiah, filmed days after he ruined Chelsea. I had been chanting his name in my home (Eddie!) that night and here he was telling me that he knew I'd been having a hard time and that all the players were with me. "Just wanted to send you some love and support and to stay strong, we're all behind you and supporting you, everyone here at Arsenal Football Club is sending you love," he said. I burst out crying. It meant so much to me that I kept it to myself for a while, playing it on a loop, rather than sharing it straight away on social media.

The morning of the game a car was organised to collect myself and my brother and best friend, Adam, to transport us to and from the stadium. It wasn't until we got to the carpeted stadium entrance and found the box that it really started to sink in. I also want to mention that I saw Louis Dunford that day and I walked past Ben White. I wish I'd had the presence of mind to get photos with them, but it all happened so fast! During the match at 2-1 up, whilst soaking in the atmosphere from Box 111, I turned around to see Nigel Winterburn sat behind me. I'd grown up watching him play! Replaying his free-kick versus Liverpool to see if Alan Smith did get a touch, to debating with the man himself which exit to take if one specific player took the next free-kick! I didn't plan to take photos during the match because I wanted to be in the moment – I still remember Sol Campbell scoring his first goal for Arsenal, on Boxing Day 2001 at Highbury and I didn't have a phone with me that day. But, I had to immortalise this time in my life with a photograph of a moment that can never be taken from me.

It's pivotal that former players are still part of our club, as this was without doubt a highlight of the day. I remember when I was a child watching Arsenal with my Nan on TV and the commentator said that the players had all

donated their day's wages to Great Ormond Street, and I loved the club from that point on. That was the club I wanted my children to grow up supporting. Little did I know that 25 years on from that, I would be the one to benefit from the amazing charity work our club and former players do and are a part of.

To do my part in giving back to Willow Foundation, I hope to raise funds for someone else's #SpecialDay by donating items to auction as well as taking part in the Virtual London Marathon on October 2. I'd love to know that I did something to help someone have a day like I had. I didn't think about my illness the whole day, and that's what makes these days so important.

I believe more clubs should follow Arsenal's blueprint for helping others. The club has been innovating since the days of Herbert Chapman and that extends beyond the pitch. Football is just a game, but Arsenal makes it so much more than that.

For more info visit willowfoundation.org.uk ■

