

# HOLLIE'S ROAD TO KONA



A Young Woman's Mission  
to Honour Another

by Qualifying for the  
Ironman World Championship

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## **Foreword By The Author**

*'Time is tricky. You have months, even years, when nothing changes a speck, when you don't go anywhere or do anything or think one new thought. And then you can get hit with a day, or an hour, or a half a second when so much happens it's almost like you got born all over again into some brand-new person you for damn sure never expected to meet.'*

**– E.R. Frank**

**T**HIS book has been one of my hardest undertakings. My blog entries of the past two years have been known to waffle on sometimes and in that sense I thought that writing an elongated version would be somewhat easy. I definitely did not understand that writing this level of words would be so difficult to fulfil. My main issue was when trying to put myself in the reader's position. Would this be interesting? Social convention states that you shouldn't talk about yourself too much when in conversation and

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although this is not a social situation, I still found it hard to just be writing about myself. After all, I really don't think I'm that interesting.

However, the hardest thing about writing this book was the subject. Rosie's death shook me to the core and is something I am still struggling to come to terms with over two years later. When I found out it changed everything. In one single moment my perfect life came crashing down before me. Yet this was not just my life. Losing Rosie changed my family's life forever. Although the pain of losing Rosie has not subsided, resurfacing these emotions was hard and there have been many tears shed while writing this book. There are raw emotions and honesty throughout this book. I have tried to remember as much of the following months after Rosie's death as I can but as expected my emotions were all over the place.

One thing that all my family agree on is that reality did not seem like reality. Being in a bubble is the best explanation. I have asked for friends' help for their opinions and accounts on how I was as there are a lot of gaps in my memory due to this. Time was something that just went by and wasn't really enjoyed. I lost friends, or just the ones who really cared were shown.

This has been a very personal book. No one has had a sneak preview, not even those closest to me. By that token some of my thoughts and doings will be a revelation to family and friends. I do owe my life to Ironman, maybe not in the sense of my physical being but mentally. It gave me the opportunity to enjoy life when I believed I never could again. For those I have met along my road to Kona, I can only thank you for also inspiring me and giving me another reason to live life. Sam was pivotal in my happiness now as without her I would not have met the love of my life, Nathan, so I cannot thank you enough for this. Nathan's support over the past year has been second to none. Thank you for your love, care and your constant desire to see me

smile. 'Anyone can make you smile, many people can make you cry, but it takes someone really special to make you smile with tears in your eyes.'

Thank you to all the friends who stuck by me and continue to do so: Yuliya, Ele, Josie, Amy, Aled, Becca, Ange, James, Lucy. The list really could go on and if I could thank you all individually I would.

My biggest thanks has to go to my parents. Not only have they moulded me into who I am but without them none of this journey would have been possible. Their support from the moment I explained my goal has been exceptional. Even considering the enormity of my task they did not doubt me and believed in me when many did not. Aside from this their financial support has made it all possible. I am forever grateful to them for being the most fantastic parents and my role models.

Not only am I blessed with amazing parents, I have a beautiful and big family. Although we were broken after the loss of Rosie, our close relationship has tried when it seemed impossible to close some of the cracks. My sister Emma, having lost her eldest daughter, has shown so much strength even when she only naturally feels the weakest woman on earth and this has shown me to be strong too. We have only got closer since the tragedy and I am truly thankful for this. My brother in law, Des, has also been an amazing source of inspiration to me. Not only because his writing ability means he should have written this book for me, but also for the continuing love, strength and jokes he shows us all despite losing a daughter. My brother Brett, our family would never be the same without some of your horrible habits that I can't help but laugh at. I cannot thank you enough for the simple words of strength you instilled in me shortly after Rosie's death. My sister in law, Linzi, you fit into the family like a missing jigsaw piece. Thank you not only for your lovely cupcakes but for the support and love you have shown us all.

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My nieces and nephews are my constant inspiration. Amber, Tom, Phoebe, Lexi, Charlie, I am proud to be your auntie (as well as godmother in some cases). Although time is passing too quickly, I am enjoying seeing you all grow up.

Although he can't read, I have to say thank you to my pug Larry. His affection has helped me throughout the pain and he became my pillow to cry on on many occasions. When he wasn't being soppy his funny pug antics made me laugh when that was the last thing I thought of.

To my nan Joyce, who much like my mum is a woman who has inspired me as a person. If I could become anything like you and your kind nature I would have succeeded in life. To my baby nephew George, whom I never got to meet, you will always remain in my heart. Also Peter Loughran, an amazing friend, family man and Ironman. The world is a worse place for no longer having these exceptional people in it.

Lastly, thank you to Rosie, my life has only been made better for having you in it, even for the short time it was. This has all been for you and I'll walk with you every day.

## Prologue

*'If you never try, you'll never know what you're capable of.'*

**– John Barrow**

**I**F you had told a younger me that I would be wearing an unflattering lycra tri-suit, be covered head-to-toe in a neoprene wetsuit and standing alongside 2,000 others on a cold September day in Wales, I would never have believed you. However, in 2013 that was exactly what I was doing. My eyes were welling up while listening to 'Old Land of My Fathers' waiting for the 'washing machine' that would take place when every athlete runs into the cold Bristol Channel. The washing machine effect is a term used by triathletes to describe the frantic hustle and bustle and occasional smack from others limbs as you battle through the first discipline of a triathlon; the swim. In this case the swim distance was 2.4 miles and this was just the beginning of the long day that awaits during an Ironman triathlon.

The swim is then followed by a 112-mile cycle. In the case of Wales it takes in some amazing views but also some tough terrain, climbing nearly 7,000ft. It is no wonder it is feared as one of the hardest Ironman courses in the world. After this gruelling experience it is then finished off by running a full 26.2-mile marathon. Again, Wales is feared as the hardest Ironman run course. I was not being paid to do this somewhat torturous event. In fact I had paid a



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lot of money to do this (a £450 entry fee), all in the name of 'fun'. However, it was for something bigger than just for fun. It was to challenge myself and see how far I could push my body and mind. Ever since I heard of Ironman, despite considering the distances impossible at first, it was something I had to achieve in my lifetime.

I had never been an endurance athlete. I hated running with a passion and had only ever cycled through the village to the local shop for a chocolate bar as a child. Swimming was the only thing I had experience and some enjoyment in. I had a dream and I was going to make it happen.

Competitiveness and determination were traits my parents instilled in me and the opportunities and influences I had in my life led me to be the person I am which ultimately made me have the right mindset to achieve my dream. It is not a mindset owned by everyone, even if I fiercely believe anyone could do an Ironman IF they want it enough. If I can then anyone can. Even though Ironman is growing in popularity, there is still a minority of people who can say they are an Ironman and being in that group makes me feel part of something special. I had never intended to do much more than complete, I just wanted to achieve something I considered bigger than myself. I had no idea of the journey I would be taken on within Ironman.

As I stood on Tenby's North Beach on 8 September 2013 I had no idea the impact that day would have on me. It completely changed my life.

# 1

*'Family. Where life begins and  
love never ends.'*

– **author unknown**

**A**S I felt the plane descend I looked out of the window and stared at the island I had dreamed of for so long. It had not just taken 17 hours of travelling to be there, it had taken two years of training and grief. In one moment my life had been changed forever and one promise had changed my whole world. If I had never experienced the loss I had two years previous there is no way I would have been about to land in Kona, Hawaii. The home of Ironman and the pinnacle of triathlon. My journey had been long and painful and this was the beginning of my final chapter. But as Maria from *The Sound of Music* would say, 'Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.'

I was born in Winchester, a small city in Hampshire, in 1991. I was brought home to a small rural village in Hampshire, an idyllic and picture-postcard place to live in the UK. My eldest siblings, Emma and Brett, were in their early teens so I added a new dimension to the family. Brett turned 14 the day I was born and Emma was sweet 16. While Emma and Brett were causing havoc trying to escape the tiny village, I was causing my own havoc in the house.

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Despite the age gap we all became close, so much so you would never know that we were half-siblings. My sister was a particularly troublesome teen and in hindsight is ashamed at the way she treated my dad, who then and now has been nothing but a perfect parent. When dad asked Emma if he could marry mum she only said yes on the condition that she got some new shoes. Emma and Brett both remember memories of me growing up and of the times when they had to babysit me. Some of the stories are full of laughs, particularly the one where I rolled off the sofa and hit my head while in Emma's care (only funny in hindsight really as there was no real permanent damage – well not that much). However, as cute a baby as I can imagine as a teenager I was an addition that was begrudged a little when they really wanted to go out and see their friends. Emma moved out to her boyfriend's when she was 18 and I was only two years old but Brett stayed with us on and off (flitting between my nan and friends' houses) until he was 28 when he moved in with his girlfriend, now wife. During that time Brett wasn't allowed to have his girlfriends stay in the same room as him due to my impressionable age. I know this frustrated him more than anything. In the younger years Brett did see some fun in having me around though. When I could talk, Brett told me to whisper 'bollocks' in dad's ear. I did exactly as he said, in fact dad was so shocked he asked me to repeat it, to which I did. Dad roared out Brett's name knowing instantly it was him.

When I was 14 Brett was still playing pranks on me. One Christmas Emma and Brett dragged me by my hands and feet and put me in Brett's room where he let off a foul stench. They then both locked me in there while I was suffocating. He has many other disgusting habits such as lying me down while he hovers above seeing how far he can dangle his spit over your face before sucking it back up. Brett is the funny and somewhat disgusting one and as you can imagine the one with a gross sense of humour. That said, there isn't a moment of sadness with Brett around.

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Emma on the other hand was the stunning older sister you are jealous of. Her hair alone was amazing, long brown with curls people pay for. Emma was absolutely in awe of me when I joined the family and was forever playing with me. I had no idea when I was born just how close we would become throughout the years. A bond between sisters is so special and she is my best friend.

My childhood was full of happiness and I can't ever recall a moment, aside from just being grumpy, that I was ever unhappy. As my parents remember I was a very happy baby, adorable toddler and always had a smile on my face, something that I continue to wear to this day: 'A smile is the best thing you can wear.' My nickname while growing up was Jolly Hollie which has never left me.

There are a vast array of pictures that my parents took while I was growing up; the two most striking things in them all being my massive smile and my chubbiness. The combination of Michelin Man legs and a huge grin did make me look rather cute. One of my favourite things to do as a child was walk in my stroller while collecting all the fruit in the house.

My mum was a bookkeeper and my dad worked in medical sales during my younger years. We always found time for a holiday together. These normally were just us three as Emma and Brett had reached the stage where they were 'too old' and 'too cool' to go on holiday with their parents. For the early years we went to many cheap and cheery resorts abroad. My parents also recall that I was a water baby, splashing happily in it when on holidays. This love may link to my future love of swimming. At the age of four dad and I began a tradition of going on mini breaks together. This started off as camping at Durdle Door. The camping tradition took us to Sandy Balls in the New Forest and I can always remember dad putting the breakfast on outside our tent as I cycled to the shop to get him a newspaper. These trips are something I cherish and

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formed a very close bond between me and my dad. I am the definition of a daddy's girl.

As dad began to get older, staying in a tent didn't quite appeal to him. We have been to an array of places since I was four and enjoyed many different activities from surfing and cycling to sun chasing. We still take these few days away together and use them to explore a new place in Europe. Throughout these trips I also learned to appreciate the things my dad does, nice food and particularly nice wine (I blame my dad for me becoming a 'wine snob'). Our trips now mainly revolve around appreciating these passions together.

My mum is simply a phenomenal woman and I hope throughout my childhood I gained at least some of her caring qualities. Despite claiming myself as a daddy's girl I am so close to my mum. She has always been the one I turn to for help and guidance. Her honesty, although sometimes brutal, is something I also respect even if I do fear asking a question sometimes particularly when asking for clothes advice. Mum's face of disapproval can be read in an instant and if you get that look never buy the item and if you have, take it back! There is nothing my mum cannot fix and just thinking about her makes me smile. She has a cheeky grin when a glass of champagne is in her hand and as I have got older we have had so many laughs together. The type of laughs when you hold your stomach in pain and feel as if you're going to wet yourself (and in honesty the latter has happened). I would be lying if I said she wasn't my best friend as well as my role model. I am so lucky to have such a fantastic woman as my mother, to me she simply is the best.

Of course, while growing up you don't appreciate your parents and although I did have these moments I know I was a relatively easy teenager in comparison to Emma. Now, however, I know how lucky I am for the love and opportunities I have had. My parents have after all made me who I am, and I don't think I'm that bad. In fact I once

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overheard one of my dad's peers say that I was a credit to him. This comment made me blush. All I have ever wanted is for my parents to be proud of me.

My parents were always keen for me to do activities mainly for me to meet people but also to keep me occupied. I think I tried every form of performing art including ballet, jazz, tap, drama, singing and attended Stage Coach every week where I spent an hour on dance, acting and singing. Attending these made me outgoing and able to get on with a variety of people. Although I loved it, my parents have some comical videos of me lunging across a small hall believing I was doing ballet; I was definitely not a dancer. Singing I can do relatively well even if that talent I only use during drunken karaoke now. All of this practice however would lead to some beautiful stage shows around the house until I actually managed to land myself a part in some pantomimes. My best appearance was at the Salisbury Playhouse where I was one of the workhouse boys and one of Fagin's gang in the musical *Oliver*. I was so dedicated to it that I cut my hair in a small bob as opposed to just wearing a wig. Not a great look for me considering I still had puppy fat at that age.

I ended up being quite musical however, being able to play three instruments; saxophone, piano and drums. To my mum's dismay I haven't kept this talent up. Aside from all of the dancing, acting, singing and instruments my mum tried me in Brownies. She has many happy memories of being a Girl Guide so thought I may do too. It was pretty clear that sewing, baking and being a traditional lady wasn't for me so I quickly swapped and joined the Scouts where I was for a long time the only girl. I always found myself able to get on with boys a lot better than I could girls and the sporty adventures we did there they were much more exciting than knitting.

We moved to another family home, more central in the village, when I was three years old and to this day that is where my heart is. Thanks to my parents' ability to work

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together as partners in life and in business I had a privileged upbringing. When I was seven my entrepreneurial dad was offered an opportunity to set up his own business alongside my mum who had the financial brains. The business was hard work to begin with, as any start-up is. It however had great legs and was building at a good rate. I was lucky enough to go to some amazing schools throughout my childhood and had I not have been to these I doubt I would have achieved what I have personally and academically. I was easily distracted and the small class numbers and strictness private schools instil meant I couldn't waver too far (although I was far from a perfect student). I attended Thorngrove School in Newbury up until secondary school. This was around the time my parents had to put hard work into the business and I ended up coming off the bus to a microwave meal. This continued to when I went to The Godolphin School in Salisbury. I will never begrudge my parents for the hard work they put in to the business as it has since enabled me to have the financial support and lifestyle I have had. I firmly believe these years were pivotal in who I am now and pushed me to independence.

Although I am grateful to Godolphin, in hindsight I didn't fit straight in. It was an all-girls school and as with many private schools had the stereotype of being 'posh'. I didn't talk like most of the students for starters, and 'mommy' and 'daddy' (said more like 'mormmy' and 'darrdy') were words that left my vocabulary when I passed the age of three. That said, I made friends as easily as I always did. I threw myself at everything that was available to me at such a school, trying desperately to find my talent (I am still searching!). However, it just seemed I was one of those people who was average at everything, better at some but excelling in none – a frustrating realisation.

I tried hard in sport as I always had. I wasn't the best, far from it, but I gave every sport a try and tried harder than the rest to conquer it. Swimming, hockey, netball,

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athletics, lacrosse (which was the school's desired sport), I tried them all. I did however through my determination end up on the first teams for swimming, hockey and netball. To this day I love them all but swimming I suppose was the only one I had that extra talent in. The only sport I was picked first in was swimming, people wanted to have me on their team. I competed in every gala possible, competed at county and national level and most years ended up being swimming captain for my school house when doing sports day. Swimming wasn't a popular sport and girls didn't seem so keen on doing it so I ended up doing pretty much every stroke in competitions until it was deemed unfair.

I just wanted to be the best at everything even if that wasn't possible and would get angry if I lost (I wasn't a sore loser, I just wanted to win). I don't believe in excuses and this is a trait that continues to this day. One sport I really was rubbish at was running. I could run like a headless chicken on a hockey pitch, my energy never seeming to falter, like a Duracell Bunny, but make me run solo and I hated it. That said however when no one would do the 1,500m at the school sports day (as ironically that was deemed as endurance) I would put my hand up even if I may have come last. I don't recall ever coming last but I certainly wasn't first. I loved sports day for the atmosphere it created even if I wasn't the best on the team. I basically wanted to be the best 'I' could be – who cares about the rest? This is a motto that I believe in to this day – the competition is only against yourself.

I was not one teachers loved for whatever reason, maybe I was too loud, and therefore was far from a teachers' pet. That was until I joined the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) when I was 13. By this time I was boarding as the travel and my parents working just made it a lot easier for everyone. At first I wasn't convinced by the CCF, which consisted of mainly Army or Navy daughters, but it introduced me to a new group of friends of all ages and it soon was evident I loved it. It challenged me and took me away from some of



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the pretentiousness the school had. It was from there I found my love of the Army and I even considered it as a career choice at one point. I was so dedicated to this potential career that I began to run to build my fitness to try and get asthma off my record, something I succeeded in after having it since I was a child. My Tuesday evenings were taken up by learning drills, cleaning weapons and marching around the school grounds all in combat kit. Mr Wiltshire, the CCF leader, must have seen something in me. He had the authority to shout so loud you could cry and I had the respect to listen. However, underneath that exterior he had the patience and attention to listen and help me push myself. I took every opportunity I was given within the CCF and went through the ranks pretty quickly. I went away most weekends with them including many evening trips to Army bases. In 2005 Mr Wiltshire mentioned this event named Ten Tors. As I look back on it now I believe this was the start of my love for endurance and challenging events.

Ten Tors is a British Army-led event for 14–19-year-olds based in the challenging terrain of Dartmoor. There are three different distances; 35 miles, 45 and 55, otherwise known as Bronze, Silver and Gold. The aim is for a team of six to hike ten specified Tors (which would be given the day before the event) over a weekend and be in before the allotted time. There is a team leader who will go to the specified checkpoints at the Tors and mainly be in control of choosing the route, navigating, decisions and keeping morale up. The objective is to finish as a full team (no easy feat) but the team is allowed to drop to four. Below that however, the team is crashed out. I didn't really have any concept of what this event was when Mr Wiltshire said I should join the 35-mile team's training to try and get on the team but as I mentioned I was always up for anything.

My weekends were then taken up with trips to cold Dartmoor. I had always liked hiking, a love I have from my parents, however this was completely different to anything

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I had done before. Bogs, marshlands, and horrific climbing up hills and tors on tough terrain. This was not just a physical test, it was a mental one. I learned map reading to an impeccable standard so was always the bossy one with the map who people trusted. I also learned all the necessary survival methods, how to pack a bergen effectively, how to fuel and how to keep morale high. I thrived on the challenge of it all.

I was an easy choice for the 2004 Godolphin CCF Ten Tors challenge whereby we were one of the two all-girl teams. The event always takes place in May and I was shocked at how huge an event it was – the atmosphere was electric. That year however didn't go well. I was in a team with two girls in my school year, Alex and Tash, and three who were two years older. This year I was just a team player and following the older lot. However, the weather was the worst it had been on record. We hadn't got as far into the course as we had hoped and while camping on our fifth tor for the night two of the older girls, one of whom was the team leader, were airlifted off due to hyperthermia. I only recently admitted to my parents I was really struggling too but was too stubborn to give up.

I told the two friends in my tent as we were shivering uncontrollably that we needed to sleep in our sleeping bags naked as our kit was wet through and only making us colder. I don't know for sure but I owe a lot to this decision. My family will hate to hear this admittance but that is the only moment I have ever thought I wouldn't wake up and was beyond caring. I was at an ultimate low and in pain but too stubborn to admit it (stubbornness being another trait I have got from my dad). I didn't find out about my other team-mates' departure until the morning and a decision had to be made.

Should we carry on, and if so who would step up as team leader? I, as always, jumped at the opportunity. The four of us pushed on cold and exhausted. We reached the tenth

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tor ten minutes behind the cut-off and the teenage tears of disappointment enveloped us all. We were driven back to the finish where we were greeted by our parents and Mr Wiltshire. The guilt of not finishing destroyed me, I have never felt disappointment like it since. I hadn't taken my boots off all weekend and when peeling my socks off there were bleeding blisters and the definite beginning of trench foot – a sure sign of how bad the conditions were. Something clicked in me then and I was determined. I was doing that again and I was doing it properly.

This is an extract of the emotional letter I wrote aged 13 to my parents after the event:

'My feet are painful and I got them bandaged up and I'm off games all week with penicillin. I missed you so much on Ten Tors and I'm really sorry I didn't make it. I'm so disappointed but there's always next year where I will maybe (hopefully, fingers crossed) be team leader. I promise I will make it next year for you and for me. I won't leave you out in the cold again for nothing.

I had a talk with Mrs Egg today about Ten Tors. She was so nice and was congratulating us. She thought we were a bit weird though when we said it was awful and then we said we were doing it again next year! So many people are going in for it next year. The really frustrating thing is that we can't get across to anyone how hard it is. They all think it's hard, but you really can't get it across. You get emotionally and physically drained and the weather was horrible. I made the whole team swear that I would never do it again, but here I am willing to do it again. I haven't come this far to give up.'

You can hear the dedication I had to adventure then and this attitude definitely played a part in my Ironman quests

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further down the line. The year after I did return to compete as the team leader alongside Alex and Tash, who I had a great bond with even if we weren't the closest friends outside of CCF. We were also joined by two very fit runners from another cadet force, a decision I made to ensure we had a strong team, and another younger girl from our school. This time we had hours and hours of hard training behind us enforced by me. I would push our pace until people broke and then push them some more, trying to get the best out of everyone but also push the limits so that that was the norm. I was only 15. The event came around and I meticulously planned the route the day before and although I was taking short cuts over more tors (my team wasn't too pleased), I was on a mission. I was being cruel to be kind and yes there were many disputes because of my military precision on how I wanted things to be done. I didn't want people wasting time and getting cold while I had to get our card stamped at the checkpoints so I would run to the top and be ready to continue straight away. My hard work and approach paid off when we were at the seventh tor by night-time. Although tired myself I remember beaming with pride at the thought that my parents and Mr Wiltshire could see how we had progressed on the tracker. I wanted more than anything to make my parents proud, it was my thank you. The following day went with relative ease apart from the youngest struggling with blisters but I managed to keep the team together and keep morale up (this was normally done by singing). We even waited on our tenth tor for an hour or so as we didn't want to get in too early in fear our supporters wouldn't be there. As we rounded the final hill towards the finish I couldn't wipe the smile of my face. We had done it as a full team, and I had proved to myself that you can do anything if you put your mind to it.

I carried on doing CCF and also completed the Silver Ten Tors and other challenges like Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award, which I collected at St James's Palace from the Duke

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of Edinburgh himself. I continued challenging myself and using all the opportunities available to me. During my time at Godolphin I climbed Mount Meru in Tanzania (another physical feat). This is opposite Kilimanjaro and the ninth highest mountain in Africa at a cool 15,000ft. While in Tanzania I also spent a week in a secluded village called Yamba in the mountains where alongside my group I taught English to children. It was the hardest thing I had done, emotionally as well as physically, but it was also the most rewarding as I felt I was helping their lives. I vividly remember organising a school sports day for the children. From the looks on their faces they felt the atmosphere of such an event as much as I did. It was a trip and experience I will never forget. I left Godolphin in 2008 with decent A Levels that secured me a slot at one of the best media universities in London to study Journalism.