**Naked Speed Founder Mark Williams tells us what inspired him to build a motorbike for Mind in West Essex**

*By Jennifer Miles Davis*

We are privileged to have a lot of people willing to do amazing things to raise money for Mind in West Essex, but recently I visited a supporter who really gets the imagination racing. Mark Williams, founder of custom motorcycle firm Naked Speed, is building a Honda CX500 Café Racer motorbike from the ground up using only donations, to raise funds for Mind in West Essex and to raise awareness of mental health issues.

Williams is a self-confessed petrol head who “eats, sleeps and dreams everything mechanical”, and who also has an eye for design (he studied mechanical engineering but always fancied studying architecture because he loves designing). At just 21 he landed his dream job with a Spanish superbike racing team, and went on to race bikes and cars semi-professionally. Accelerating forwards to the present day, his workshop in Wendens Ambo is a motorbike enthusiasts’ utopia, full of semi-built bikes and parts all waiting to be match-made to create something unique. Even his coffee table is a bespoke build – motorbike wheels stacked on top of each other between two (slightly wobbly) black and chrome bar stools.

But however smooth the ride sounds, it hasn’t been without its difficulties. Things took a dramatic turn for Williams at just 19 years old, when his father took his own life. A few months later, still reeling, his best friend was killed on his motorbike by a drunk driver. Williams then “went off the rails for a few years.” During the course of our conversation, he went on to mention three further tragic losses of close friends and family, the most recent being a friend who died in a motorbike accident just last year.

It’s not surprising, then, that the highs and lows of a risky lifestyle compounded by unresolved grief caught up with him, and he found himself contemplating taking his own life. He called a crisis number and mental health nurses came to visit him, and he says that if he hadn’t made that call he might not be here today. That was ten years ago, and he admits that he even now still occasionally finds himself in a dark place, hence the decision to work on this build. “For me it’s all about awareness. If people are in need of help, I want them not to feel ashamed to pick up the phone. Because I’ve suffered with my mental health, with depression, I just want people to have help if they need it “

Although many parts have already been donated, the build has a way to go, and Williams is looking for donations and sponsorship to enable him to complete it. The bike will be on display at the Mind in West Essex stall at the Dunmow Soapbox Race on Sunday, May 29th 2019. If you wish to sponsor this project, contact jdavis@mindinwestessex.org.uk, or visit [www.mindinwestessex.org.uk](http://www.mindinwestessex.org.uk) or [www.naked-speed.com](http://www.naked-speed.com).

**An Interview with Mark Williams, Naked Speed**

*What inspired you to take on this project for a mental health charity?*

As a kid, my childhood was fine, then my father committed suicide when I was 19.

*Did you know that he was having problems?*

No. The first I knew was that there were relationship issues, and my mother had asked him for a divorce. We were oblivious, because when you’re young you think your parents are these wonderful things who never do anything wrong, then you grow up into adults and realise that life isn’t always like that. So being 19, I had an older and a younger sister, I had to identify him as well, with my Mum, and to be honest I was young in my years and I wasn’t ready for anything like that. There was no kind of counselling or anything offered. So I tried to carry on with life, and I went off the rails for a couple of years.

*Did you have a good relationship with your Dad?*

He was quite a difficult person to get close to. I suppose we were closish, we’d go fishing and stuff like that, but if I look at father and son relationships that other people have I think, well I didn’t have that, but still what I had was great – I felt protected, and I still thought he was great, I just had no idea that he felt like that. It’s things like, he must’ve known how he felt when his Dad took his own life, so why didn’t he think for a second how we’d feel? But I also realise that he wasn’t thinking straight, and I accept that. I totally accept that. I’ve forgiven him. In those days counselling just wasn’t there. And even more so than now, men weren’t allowed to say how they felt, and I know he came from a very strict family. I just appreciated what I had. One of the biggest things for me was writing a letter saying how I felt, and putting it in a plastic envelope, and burying it with him.

*Was that therapeutic?*

Massive. Almost like closure. I wasn’t advised to do it by anyone, I just did it. I’ve always tried to figure out my own mind. But I realise that sometimes you can’t.

*So how did you cope after you lost your Dad?*

One of my closest friends from school helped me for a few months – I’d just go to the pub and get drunk and try and find somewhere to take my mind away – and then he was killed by a drunk driver on his motorbike, three months later. So it kind of wasn’t good. But I then met someone, and everything was great, and we decided to go off to Spain, and live and work in Spain. So we did that for four years. I went to work for a superbike racing team.

*That sounds like a really cool job!*

It was – yeah – for that age it was perfect. I was 21, I travelled the whole of Europe. I didn’t speak Spanish when I first went, but after six months I managed to start piecing it together. You learn a language quickly when you’re hungry! And they teach you all the swear words first! It was a great experience, and was good because I had to live and work with a team very closely. And I guess at that time I’d never really dealt with the loss of what had happened with my Dad. And it was a few years later that I found out that my Grandfather had also committed suicide – my father’s father. So then for me it was, well, is there something wrong with me as well? And then – although I’d been absolutely fine, I’d never really suffered from any depression – but then probably ten years ago, I got depressed, and I very nearly contemplated ending everything. And I basically made a phone call to the NHS, and the mental health nurses came out, and I’m glad they did, otherwise I might not be here today.

*What triggered it?*

I don’t know. I’d lost the business, my first stab at running a business, I was back here in the UK by this time. I like to live a bit dangerously – may this is part of it – I raced cars semi-professionally for a couple of years, so I’d always have a massive high from having a race weekend, and after that there was a dip. And that got stronger and stronger, so I guess I’d built up to it. And I’ve been struggling with it every since. It’s kind of weird because, you almost have to live on the edge sometimes to make you feel alive. It’s like, being on the edge makes those endorphins work, so that you don’t feel like you’re in a dark place.

So, although I’ve never been to Mind personally myself, I’ve heard of the good work they do, and I find myself in dark places still now, and sometimes thinking what’s the point.

*You’re working on your own here, do you find that tricky?*

Yes, I’m a very social person. I like to be laughing, joking, being the prankster. I’ve said to myself that if I can’t make a living out of this throughout this year then I’ll have to do something else, but still do this as a passion, as a sideline. As much as I love doing it, it’s hard when you’re on your own all day. But I have my wife and three dogs at home. She’s always stood by me, I wouldn’t be able to do this without her, to be honest.

*So where did the idea for the build come from?*

In 2015 I built a BMW Cafe Racer which was unveiled in the Bike Shed in 2016, and I’d just lost a close friend from pancreatic cancer, so I dedicated the build to him for the show. And the bike was such a hit, that’s what inspired me to think ok, I’m going to go and do what I want to do. So, yeah, I think for me it’s all about wanting awareness. If people are in need of help, not to feel ashamed to pick up the phone. Even one of my customers said to me, ‘I feel like that sometimes, but I feel ashamed to say anything’. It’s part of life. I think a big part of mental health now is social media. It’s such a destructive platform. You see all the good pictures, and think ‘my life’s rubbish compared to that’ – that’s not how their life actually is. I’m guilty of it myself, I started a few years ago on Instagram, and I’ve got over 30,000 followers now. And now I think I want 40,000! It is good for my business, but the weird thing is, the majority of my followers are in the States. So that also makes me think, I’m in the wrong country for this! It is different in the UK because people think, winter’s coming, I’ll lock everything away, and think about it in the spring/summer. So then they’ll come to me in spring and say ‘can you build me a bike for the summer?’ And I say no! You’re looking between three and eighteen months for a build.

*So the proceeds of this, do you want it to go towards a specific purpose?*

It would be nice if went into something where you can see tangible results. Also counselling is very important, so I’d like it to go towards that. Like I say, because I’ve suffered with my mental health, with depression and stuff, I just want people to have help if they need it. Even now, some mornings I wake up and don’t want to get up, but once I’m up and out, it’s all good.