

= Steph Cunningham =

Stephanie " Steph " Roach (née Dean ; previously Cunningham) is a fictional character from the British Channel 4 soap opera Hollyoaks , played by Carley Stenson . She debuted on @-@ screen during the episode airing on 8 March 2000 . Steph was introduced into the serial by executive producer Jo Hallows . In 2009 Stenson decided to quit , but the then producer Lucy Allan convinced her to stay to play out a dramatic storyline . The announcement of her departure was made public in June 2010 . Stenson 's fellow cast members have described her as a " Hollyoaks legend " because of her lengthy duration .

Steph has been described as having a highly confident persona , a trait Stenson enjoyed portraying throughout . Steph is also played as " fame hungry " . She is noted for a number of high @-@ profile storylines such as the portrayal of bullying in a school environment , the portrayal of epilepsy , which Stenson felt had been a ' taboo subject ' for too long . Other stories include becoming a widow and her involvement in Niall 's revenge plot and her constant desire for fame . One of Steph 's final storylines was the portrayal of cervical cancer , which Stenson conducted extensive research into . The character was subsequently killed off in a special block of episodes branded by the media as " fire week " . Some critics described her final storylines as " upsetting " and " surprising " . Steph 's relationship with Gilly Roach was viewed unfavourable by most . Stenson has been nominated for several different awards for her portrayal of Steph .

= = Storylines = =

= = = Backstory = = =

Steph is the daughter of Frankie and Johnno Dean (Colin Wells) . She has two brothers , Craig (Guy Burnett) and Jake (Kevin Sacre) , and a sister , Debbie (Jodi Albert) . She is not close to her siblings , and has a strained relationship with her mother , who prefers to involve herself in Craig and Jake 's lives and boast about Debbie 's professional singing prowess . In contrast , Steph has a very close relationship with her father , Johnno .

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Steph is introduced as a new student at Hollyoaks High , with early storylines focussing on her school life and best friend Zara Morgan . She frequently bullies fellow pupil Lisa Hunter (Gemma Atkinson) , driving her to attempt suicide . When Steph 's friends react disapprovingly , she apologises and promises to change . She cultivates a promiscuous reputation , having brief relationships with Brian and footballer Scott . Steph eventually becomes friends with Lisa , but accidentally ruins her hair while attempting to dye it . Believing that she did so on purpose , her other friends shun her . Distracted by the quarrel , Steph does not notice that she is being stalked by serial killer Toby Mills (Henry Luxemburg) . He attacks her , hitting her in the head with a spanner and leaving her to die . Steph is comatose for a week , and is diagnosed with epilepsy when she regains consciousness . Upon learning that Toby is Lisa 's brother @-@ in @-@ law , Steph resumes her bullying . Her father eventually catches her physically attacking Lisa , and orders her to leave her alone . The two go on to attend university together , where Steph apologises for her cruelty and they are able to reconcile .

In the aftermath of her epilepsy diagnosis , Steph is initially unable to deal with her condition . Her father supports her , but ends up abandoning his family following the revelation that he has a secret son . Steph 's mother remarries , and she comes to see her new stepfather , Jack Osborne (James McKenna) , as a father figure . Steph largely reforms following her diagnosis , becoming more sensitive to the needs of others . She comes to terms with how dangerous her condition could be uncontrolled , and in time her epileptic episodes become less frequent . Steph fails her college exams and is forced to retake them . Fuelled by jealousy of her sister 's West End success , she

attempts to embark on a celebrity career . She appears in the fictional television show Bid Crazy TV , and auditions for a girl band , X @-@ Pose , which transpires to be a money @-@ making scam . She then sells a kiss and tell story on celebrity Joe Jones , who she meets after a failed audition to become one of his backing singers . When Steph 's notoriety peters out , her stepbrother and agent Darren arranges for her to have sex with a footballer . After their liaison , Steph discovers that he is actually just the team 's mascot . Humiliated , she abandons her pursuit of fame .

In a comedy storyline , Steph 's great @-@ aunt Reenie leaves her an inheritance , said to be a " small fortune " , on the condition that Steph performs a charitable act . She fulfils the requirement by saving Leo Valentine (Brian Bovell) from choking , however discovers that Small Fortune is , in fact , a donkey . Steph sends it to live at a donkey sanctuary .

Steph becomes a babysitter to Tom , and later begins a relationship with his older brother , Max . They get engaged , but have an on @-@ off relationship fraught with frequent arguments . Steph 's friend Niall falls in love with her and attempts to come between them . She and Max eventually marry , but on their wedding day , Niall accidentally runs Max over , killing him . After a period of intense grief , Steph has sex with Niall . He is revealed to be a villain , holding his family hostage and killing his sister , Tina McQueen (Leah Hackett) . A frightened Steph goes to stay with her brother Craig in Scotland . Niall follows her , and takes Steph , Tom and Craig hostage . After a stand @-@ off in which Craig makes Niall acknowledge the hurt he has caused , Niall throws himself off a cliff to his death .

After a long holiday with Tom , Steph returns and begins to put her life back together . She falls for dance teacher Fernando Fernandez (Jeronimo Best) , inspiring jealousy in Gilly , who has feelings for Steph . She and Fernando become engaged , as do Gilly and Cheryl Brady (Bronagh Waugh) , Steph 's employee . Realising that she loves Gilly , Steph breaks up with Fernando , but due to loyalty to Cheryl , refuses to date Gilly when he breaks up with her . Gilly briefly becomes engaged to Jem Costello (Helen Russell @-@ Clarke) , but ultimately leaves her to be with Steph .

Steph discovers she has cervical cancer , and has a hysterectomy . In the aftermath , she decides to pursue a singing career and applies for The X Factor . Despite using her cancer as a sob story , she is rejected at her audition . Her cancer spreads , and though Steph has chemotherapy , she is later told that her condition is terminal . Gilly struggles to cope with her diagnosis , almost causing Steph to cancel their wedding . It goes ahead , however , and after their honeymoon , Steph begins to make plans for her impending death . When Il Gnosh , a local Italian restaurant catches fire , Steph saves Amy Barnes and her children , but chooses to remain inside and die . After Steph 's funeral , her family and friends watch video messages she recorded for them prior to her death . On 11 March 2011 , Cindy returns and Darren tells her about Steph and plays her the goodbye message . On 26 December , Steph made a one @-@ off appearance as a ghost to Doug Carter .

= = Development = =

= = = Casting and characterisation = = =

Stenson originally auditioned to play a friend of the established character Zara Morgan (Kelly Greenwood) . Although unsuccessful , the Hollyoaks casting team later asked her to apply for the new role of Steph Cunningham , and placed her straight into the final stage of auditions . She was delighted to subsequently be given the part , which was her first major television role . Stenson joined the cast straight after leaving high school , aged seventeen . She made her first appearance in March 2000 , and by 2007 had become the longest @-@ serving female cast member remaining .

Steph was introduced as a friend of Zara 's , who was initially " quite naive " and easily led . Within two years , her personality had altered greatly . Steph became a bully , and " a bit of a bitch " . Stenson enjoyed this transformation into a villain , as she believed it made Steph a more memorable character . She also felt she could " really go somewhere " with Steph 's bitchiness in her acting , but in contrast struggled to portray her more genuine moments . She commented that Steph is the

type of character only to cry over things she " really cares about " . Stenson found this difficult to relate to , and struggled to " find a balance between pushing it too far and far enough " . She ultimately preferred to play her as a bitch , though one " more comical rather than just out @-@ and @-@ out nasty . "

Stenson assessed that Steph " really isn 't all bad , more of a lovable rogue who just likes making mischief for attention . " She deemed her character " very unpredictable " , with a great deal of confidence . The LINC Online called her a " beautiful blonde wild child with a penchant for arrogance and displays of egotism " . Sarah Moolla of The People branded her " superficial " , the Daily Record 's Merle Brown referred to her as " a true red @-@ blooded female , and Emma Johnson of the Liverpool Echo assessed that she had a " couldn 't @-@ care @-@ less " attitude . BBC America described Steph as a two @-@ sided character . They observed that as well as a bitch , she could be " dishonest , vain , jealous and small @-@ minded " , and wrote " She causes trouble when she wants to and will happily lie and gossip to get her own way . " Conversely , they noted that for those on her good side , " She can be your best friend , a confidante and sweet natured girl " .

As Steph developed , she was revealed to have a " softer side " . Beneath her tough façade was a " deeply insecure little girl who crave [d] love and affection . " An " artistic and creative " streak lead her to attend performing arts college , and attain a degree in drama . This inspired a rivalry with fellow actor Summer Shaw (Summer Strallen) , which saw Steph " determined to keep the limelight on her . " Nadia Mendoza of The Sun described Steph as Hollyoaks 's " resident drama queen " , explaining that Steph 's dislike of Summer stemmed from the fact she had previously been the only actress in the village . Stenson downplayed her vocal ability , and opined that Steph is " hardly the world 's best singer " .

= = = Family and relationships = = =

In late @-@ 2002 , more than two years after Steph 's arrival , her family were introduced to the series . The dynamics of the Dean family evolved with time . They were initially a dysfunctional unit , but in a different way to other Hollyoaks families , as they tended to disrupt the lives of others whilst being happy amongst themselves . Upon their arrival , actress Helen Pearson , who plays mother Frankie Dean , assessed that they were " really supportive of each other " , and " quite solid , like an old @-@ fashioned family unit " , despite their lack of finances which required them to undertake " various scams to keep body and soul together . " As time went on , the Deans were affected by affairs and parental separation , more typical of the soap 's other families .

Steph had several romances throughout her time in the series . In her early years , Stenson played her as a flirt , who acted out for the attention of boys . Her first lovers included Christian virgin Brian Drake (Jonathan Le Billon) and football playing " lothario " Scott Anderson (Daniel Hyde) . Her later relationship with Cameron Clark (Ben Gerrard) had " ups and downs " due to his obsessive @-@ compulsive disorder . To boost his confidence she forced him to join a rock band . Her actions were successful , and Stenson said Steph was " proud " of this . She sacrificed their relationship so Cameron could leave and tour Europe . Sarah Ellis of Inside Soap praised Steph for being so supportive , despite Cameron 's " erratic behaviour " .

Steph appeared to " finally [find] happiness " when she fell in love with Max Cunningham (Matt Littler) . Although attracted to her , Max initially resisted Steph as he believed her to be a " ditzy , air @-@ headed blonde " , only interested in " bad boys . " When his younger brother Tom (Ellis Hollins) developed a crush on her , the " kind , sensitive way " Steph handled it altered his impression . Littler explained , " Max begins to realise there 's more to her than her looks . He begins to think she 's actually really nice and they become friends . " Littler quit the series in 2008 , and producers planned his exit around Max 's wedding to Steph . He was killed off on their wedding day , as he pulled Tom out of the path of a car . Before she filmed the aftermath of Max 's death , Stenson listened to depressing music to reach her character 's bereaved mindset . Stenson believed it was a mistake to kill Max off , and " such an awful thing to happen to Steph " , until she received " amazing feedback " about the storyline . In the aftermath , Tom asked Steph to be his mother , in a scene that then @-@ executive producer Bryan Kirkwood deemed his favourite of the year . The

interaction between the two was intended to represent " what Hollyoaks is all about - lots of heart , relationships , friendships , love and loss . " Kirkwood praised Stenson 's performance throughout the storyline , particularly during in that scene .

Steph has a brief fling with Niall Rafferty (Barry Sloane) . The actors were required to film " steamy scenes " . Stenson felt it a " hard challenge " to portray , she had to convince the audience that Steph would genuinely get together with her husband 's killer . Some viewers , including all the staff of Inside Soap believed their chemistry to be greater . Stenson ultimately decided Steph was " better suited " to Max . She hoped that Steph would have even " more drama around the corner " along with " a bit of comic relief " .

= = = Illnesses = = =

= = = Epilepsy = = =

In a storyline which Stenson found challenging to portray , Steph was diagnosed with epilepsy . Feeling a responsibility to members of the viewing public who have the disorder , the actress researched it extensively , assisted by Mersey Television . As well as reading about it , she visited several organisations , and spent a day on set with a teenage girl ? close in age to Steph ? who has the condition , and who shared insights on the experiences she had been through . The actress felt trepidation about acting out seizures , but for her first one was assisted by the episode 's director , who had witnessed seizures first @-@ hand , having once worked in a hospital . Stenson felt privileged to be chosen for the storyline , particularly as epilepsy is typically a taboo subject which had not featured prominently in a soap opera before .

Barbara Pinder of Epilepsy Action praised the serial for taking on the subject matter . Hollyoaks researchers contacted the charity when developing the storyline , and Pinder felt that the show succeeded in communicating the impact of Steph 's diagnosis . She stated , " It is great to see a soap opera , specially one that is watched mainly by young people , look at the issue of epilepsy as it often gets ignored . " Stenson was pleased the storyline was " reaching out to people " , and stated that she had received many letters from fans thanking her for highlighting an under @-@ exposed subject , as well as positive feedback on the Hollyoaks website .

Steph initially reacted angrily towards her diagnosis , which Pinder confirmed was not uncommon , explaining : " The character is going through stages that someone with epilepsy is likely to go through . Teenagers can have terrible trouble coming to terms with epilepsy at a time when they have a lot of other difficult things to deal with . It can also be quite a blow to their independence . " Writing for the Sunday Mail , Steve Hendry assessed that the plot would serve to " bring the arrogant and often spiteful Steph down a peg or two " , humbling her . Stenson agreed that Steph 's epilepsy would make her " more understanding " , inspiring thoughtfulness towards others , as opposed to her former rejection of those different to her . However , she observed that the condition may also serve to worsen her behaviour towards " a chosen few . " The character 's epilepsy was further explored in the Hollyoaks spin @-@ off In Too Deep , in which Steph has a seizure and believes she is possessed by a spirit , almost causing her to drown .

= = = Cervical cancer = = =

In 2010 , Steph was diagnosed with cervical cancer and underwent a hysterectomy . The plot was said to echo the true story of former Big Brother contestant Jade Goody , who died of cervical cancer in 2009 . It was devised prior to the appointment of Paul Marquess as executive producer . He chose to continue with it , deciding that it would be interesting to give Steph another serious storyline , and have a character that viewers " know and love going through a really hard time . " In preparation for the storyline , Stenson studied the illness to give her a time @-@ line of the experiences Steph would undergo . She chose not to speak with any cancer patients about coping with cancer , believing that everyone handles it in their own personal way . Additionally , she aimed

to make Steph 's realisation of her cancer as believable as possible , explaining that : " Steph wouldn 't have any prior knowledge about what to expect , and I wanted to see it fresh through her eyes " . She was flattered to be trusted with the storyline , and found it particularly important to get her portrayal right as , during the previous year , she had fronted the Arm Against Cervical Cancer campaign .

The producers aimed to send a message of early detection to the series ' young audience , and had Steph initially ignore her symptoms . Stenson hoped to raise awareness of cervical cancer , and educate women about the importance of regular smear tests . She stated that Steph was confident about beating her illness , as " the alternative [wa] sn 't worth thinking about . " The character was originally reluctant to tell her family about the cancer for fear of hurting them , and was embarrassed to tell her love interest Gilly Roach (Anthony Quinlan) , not wanting him to have to look after her . As the storyline developed , Steph cancelled her wedding to Gilly due to his refusal to accept that her condition was terminal . Quinlan explained that his character impeded her ability to deal with the situation , with his disbelief contrasting Steph 's attempt to " take this in her stride and [...] spend quality time with the people she loves before she goes . "

Marquess deemed the storyline as a whole one which could only be depicted the way it was in Hollyoaks , aiming to tell a " tragic story " with a " sweet and humorous tone " . " A comedy element of the storyline had Steph use her cancer as a sob story to enter a talent show , recruiting orphan Tom to take to the stage with her , giving her story further emotional impact . Stenson commented , " Deep down she knows she 's not a fantastic singer , but she thought the judges would feel sorry for her and put her through . " According to Quinlan , viewer feedback on the storyline was " brilliant " . He stated that viewers were upset by Steph 's illness , and that it had even brought his own mother to tears .

= = = Departure = = =

In 2010 , it was announced that Stenson had decided to quit the serial to pursue a career in musical theatre . She deemed it " one of the most difficult decisions [she had] ever made " , stating that Hollyoaks had been her " dream job " and that she would miss her friends in the cast and crew . She made the decision to resign around June 2009 , but was convinced by then @-@ producer Lucy Allan to play out a long exit storyline , which concluded filming in September 2010 . Before filming her final scenes , Stenson secured her first West End role . Though she had previously felt ready to leave the series , when the time came , she was upset because she felt the reality of it . She called her final scenes " really sad and emotional " , and stated that while she had not had any input in Steph 's exit , she was happy with it .

Hollyoaks devised an arson plot to begin on Guy Fawkes Night 2010 , as a result of which some characters would die . The production team intended to keep details of who would die secret until transmission . Prior to broadcast , Stenson revealed that Steph would risk her own life to save Amy Barnes (Ashley Slanina @-@ Davies) , Leah Barnes (Jessica Croft @-@ Lane) and Lucas Hay . The actress explained that " She stares death in the face every day because of her cancer , so thinks she really has nothing to lose now . " Stenson performed one of her own stunts during filming , with the rest undertaken by a stunt double . A promotional trailer for the episodes aired across the Channel 4 network , featuring Steph on fire . In the event , Steph rescued Amy and her children from a burning building but refused to leave herself , saying she was ready to die . Her exit received a positive reaction from fans on the social networking website Twitter , with Stenson stating that she was " honoured " by the response . Steph 's legacy continued following her death , with her husband , family and friends left to come to terms with their grief . On 29 November 2011 it was confirmed Stenson was to reprise the role for a one off guest appearance as Steph in which she appears as an angel to Doug Carter who had attempted suicide and she convinces him that his life matters . Steph tells Doug something and he shows Frankie a special song that Steph had recorded for her . Frankie , overjoyed that her daughter had not forgotten her , wept whilst Angel Steph looked on happily and placed a hand on her shoulder before winking to Tom and returning to heaven , stating she was " ready for her solo . "

= = Reception = =

Stenson received several award nominations for her portrayal of Steph . She was nominated in the " Best Comedy Performance " category at the 2005 and 2006 British Soap Awards , and for " Best Dramatic Performance " in 2009 . She received a long @-@ list nomination for the " Best Actress " accolade at the 2005 National Television Awards . In 2008 , Stenson was nominated for the " Sexiest Female " Inside Soap Award , which she found flattering . A further nomination in the same category followed in 2010 , accompanied by nominations for " Best Actress " , and " Best Dramatic Performance " for Steph learning she had cancer . The character was selected as one of the " top 100 British soap characters " by industry experts for a poll to be run by What 's on TV , with readers able to vote for their favourite character to discover " Who is Soap 's greatest Legend ? "

Following her departure , her co @-@ stars commented favourably on the actress and character , with Jorgie Porter deeming her an " ultimate original " , Gemma Merna stating that she " was Hollyoaks " , and Ricky Whittle admitting that he cried during the airing of her final scenes . Television and entertainment website Holy Soap did not see Steph 's fire death coming , calling her actions brave and her ten @-@ year duration " mammoth " . They described her most memorable moment as telling Niall she did not love him and then watching him commit suicide . Inside Soap said if there was an award for " the unluckiest character in soap " , Steph would certainly win . In his column for The Guardian , television critic Jim Shelley stated that it was time for Steph to go , having " suffered enough " during her tenure . Humorously recapping her ten years in Hollyoaks , Shelley wrote :

Sarah Welsh of the South Wales Echo gave the stalking storyline a negative review . She called both plot and acting " ridiculous " and commented that while she often felt sorry for the serial being snubbed at the National Soap Awards , " This is not the way to raise the game . "

Steph 's relationships were a focal point of many reviews . The Daily Mirror 's Nicola Methven and Polly Hudson found a 2004 love triangle between Steph , her sister Debbie and love interest Dan Hunter (Andrew McNair) " surprising compelling " . Grace Dent of The Guardian observed of her failed engagement to Fernando : " With the best will in the world , I don 't feel that marriage was ever going to last " . Dent had previously named Steph singing the Sugababes ' " About You Now " at Max 's funeral one of her four favourite soap moments of 2008 . Roz Laws of the Sunday Mercury felt there was " plenty of chemistry " between Steph and Gilly . Their relationship was frequently commented on by the Daily Mail 's Jaci Stephen in her weekly soap column . She expressed disinterest in Steph and Cheryl 's rivalry over Gilly , and found it implausible that she and Jem would quarrel over him . When the two finally admitted their feelings for one another in May 2010 , Stephen accurately predicted that their happiness would be short @-@ lived . She highlighted a lack of subtlety in the scripting of the lead @-@ up to their wedding , observing : " Of course , you know that the moment she says that nothing is going to stop her marrying Gilly , the Grim Reaper will be pulling up in his hearse , shortly behind the wedding car . "

Stephen derided Steph 's singing ambition during her X Factor plot line , deeming her voice " average " and writing that she did not need to use her cancer for the sympathy vote , as her singing alone would be enough for that . She later questioned when Steph would accept that she was not intended to be a singer , commenting that her " ambition could not be made of sterner stuff " , but that Simon Cowell and the remainder of the population would breathe " a major sigh of relief " at the abandonment of her showbiz dreams . More positively , Stephen wrote that she loved the bravery in " both the humour and pathos that Steph 's manipulation of her cancer brings . "

Reviewing the Steph @-@ centric spin @-@ off In Too Deep for The Times , Tim Teeman commented that while late @-@ night Hollyoaks episodes had previously been amusing , " sexed @-@ up " versions of the main show , with In Too Deep it became " less shagathon , more What Lies Beneath " . The episode was selected as recommended viewing by Laws of the Sunday Mercury . The launch of Hollyoaks Later series one , in which Niall returns to target Steph , was named a " Satellite Pick of the Day " by the Daily Record . Christopher Howse , writing " Tatworld " for The Daily Telegraph ? a column chronicling tabloid culture ? named Steph and her family joint

tenth in a list of Top Ten Deans , which included entrants such as Dean Koontz , Dean Gaffney and Richard Dean Anderson .