

I couldn't imagine doing anything other than this now

Zoe Taylor is continuing her late mum's mission – helping widowed women find friendship when they need it most

When Zoe Taylor talks about The Jolly Dollies, she talks about connection – and about the woman who started it all.

"She was awesome," Zoe says of her late mum, Yvonne Vann. "She knew exactly how she wanted it to be run."

Founded in 2013 by Yvonne after she was widowed herself, The Jolly Dollies is a UK-wide social organisation for women who have lost a life partner. Today, it supports thousands of women through almost 130 local groups, offering friendship, shared experiences and understanding at a time when many feel desperately alone.

"The common denominator is obviously grief," Zoe explains. "But they're not coming for counselling. They're coming for the connection and the peer support."

Zoe now runs the organisation

full-time, after taking over following her mum's death in 2021.

The idea behind The Jolly Dollies is simple. Women join their local group, are introduced by a volunteer coordinator, and take part in social activities at their own pace – coffee mornings, meals out, walks, theatre trips and holidays.

"That's why I think people join us," Zoe says. "Eight times out of 10 they say, 'Look, I've got a great family, I've got fabulous friends, but they just don't get it.'"

For Molly Lock, that sense of being understood arrived at a time of overwhelming loss.

"I lost three very close members of my family – my husband, my sister and my daughter – all in a matter of months," she says. "I thought, 'I'm going to get out of this. I'm not gonna go under.'"

Joining The Jolly Dollies gave her something to hold on to.

"It was a lifeline," Molly says. "It was brilliant, absolutely brilliant."

Like many new members, Molly felt a little anxious walking into her first meeting.

"Oh, I was totally nervous," she admits, laughing. "They met in a pub, and I was so nervous I asked the wrong table if they were The Jolly Dollies!"

But she forced herself to stay and found the right table – and gradually, friendships formed.

"You have to force yourself at first because you don't know these people," she explains. "Making new friends has been an absolute godsend for me."



Molly Lock (centre) with her Jolly Dolly friends

Over time, those friendships became a vital part of her life.

"We have meetings once a month," Molly says. "And then we have a meal after because everything's based around food and drink!"

They also travel together.

"We go away for my birthday which is in January," she says. "Just four of us... we've done that for a few years now."

For Sarah Matthews, The Jolly Dollies offered a way forward after sudden bereavement.

"My husband passed and within hours everything just turned upside down," she says.

She joined the group around six months later and, like many women, needed time to settle.

"You're listening to people more so than joining in to begin with," she says. "Your mind is very much scrambled the first year of grieving."

Finding the right local group made all the difference. After an initial meeting that didn't quite click, Sarah was introduced to another local meet-up.

"I soon found my right group to be in," Sarah says warmly.

Since then, the impact has been transformative.

"They've given me such confidence," she says. "It really gives you the courage



Sarah Matthews (front centre) on holiday in Venice with the Jolly Dollies

to look outside your own little box and to get you out there."

That confidence has led to new friendships, shared experiences and travel with other Jolly Dollies.

"We've done lots of holidays together," Sarah says. "It really gives you a boost."

What matters most, she believes, is the shared understanding.

"Family and friends understand only to a certain degree," she explains. "You really don't realise what it's like until you actually go through it."

That understanding allows joy to return without guilt.

"You can be having a fantastic time," Sarah says, "but then you have that 'moment'... and the girls understand that."

Zoe sees those moments as proof her mum's vision still works.

"I think confidence is probably the main thing our Jolly Dollies find," she says. "We're enabling people to get back out into the world. And, of course, the special friendships that many of our members make."

She recalls one national Jolly Dollies gathering in Devon where she saw this magical connection in action.

"Seeing 100 women all on the same dance floor dancing their little socks off was amazing," she says. "So many of the ladies came up to me saying, 'It's so nice to dance and just not be judged.'"

For all three women, the message to anyone considering joining is simple.

"Just do it," Molly says. "We're in the same boat."

And for Zoe, every new member is a reminder of why The Jolly Dollies exist at all – to make sure no woman has to navigate widowhood alone.

A Lasting Legacy

The Jolly Dollies began with one woman's determination to turn loss into connection.

Yvonne Vann founded the group in 2013, after caring for her husband at home for many years before he died. What started as a small pub quiz team in Weston-super-Mare soon grew into something much bigger.

"She just thought, 'Well, if this is working here, there's nothing that covers the rest of the country, so we must be able to get it out there'," says her daughter Zoe.

A determined Yvonne built the organisation from scratch.

"She didn't even have an email address," Zoe laughs. "She just had piles of papers all over her front room."

After Yvonne was diagnosed with cancer in 2021 and died five weeks later, Zoe stepped in.

"She told me, 'When I go, you've got to carry The Jolly Dollies on,'" Zoe says.

Now running the organisation full time, Zoe feels her mum's presence in everything she does.

"I feel like my mum's with me all the time," she says. "It's a lot of work, but I couldn't imagine myself doing anything other than this now. I'm super proud of what she started and it's my honour to carry it on."



Yvonne Vann

WORDS: SIAN DOLAN IMAGES: ZOE TAYLOR/MOLLY LOCK/SARAH MATTHEWS



Zoe with her late mum Yvonne and daughter Olivia

If you're interested in joining The Jolly Dollies, visit thejollydollies.co.uk

