



No longer alone: Yvonne Vann today and, inset, with her husband Vic

When Yvonne lost her husband, she yearned to talk to others who REALLY understood her grief and isolation. So she came up with a truly life-enhancing idea

THE merry widows' club



as I lay by his side. Without him I was lost. I had no purpose and no idea how to live a life of my own. I was glad of having my daughter and two grandchildren nearby. My whole family were a great support. But they haven't, thank God, endured the heartbreak of losing their partner in life. How could they understand how I felt?

Three years went by, and although I never fell into depression, I felt isolated and terrified of the future that lay ahead of me.

But then, once again, June's path crossed mine. Over the garden gate, just as before, she told me that her husband had recently died, and that he, too, had MSA.

We could have stood there for ever, feeling the weight lifting from our shoulders as we talked to someone who truly understood how we felt. Instead, though, we arranged to meet for a drink — which had the added benefit of getting us both out of our respective houses.

And so our friendship grew, through mutual grief. We talked, we laughed, we cried; but most importantly of all, we learned that we were not alone.

Through friends of friends, other widows heard about our little get-togethers and asked if they could join us. Some had lost their partners after long illnesses; others had lost them very suddenly. But at the core of our grief, we shared the same need to connect with others who could relate to us — and join forces in piecing our lives back together.

To that end, while there was much talking, there were also evenings out and trips to the cinema. We even ventured, en masse, to a basic car maintenance course. After all, we'd had husbands to change our tyres until now.

When a local newspaper picked up on our story, I realised that with a little organisation I could create a social network for widows. An estimated 500 women are widowed in the UK every day, most of them over 60. And I

We share a need to piece our lives back together

would guess that most feel as I did in the months and years of grief that follow.

So, 18 months ago, I launched the Jolly Dollies website. The name, silly though it may be, reflects the importance of seeing the lighter side of life after you've lost the one you love.

Since then, our membership has grown steadily, and groups are springing up all over the country. Every day my inbox fills with emails from Jolly Dollies, telling me about the pub quizzes, pot luck dinners, evenings at the theatre, shopping trips and karaoke nights that are bringing them together and making all the difference to lives that have been shattered by grief.

One member from Hereford wrote recently to say that she'd just taken her first holiday alone — a major milestone for a widow. Heading for Devon, she had contacted our members in Paignton, who were only too thrilled to take her under their wing and show her the sights. She had a wonderful time.

I'm never prouder of the Jolly Dollies than when my friends and I hit the floor together for the last dance at a local live music night.

In another lifetime, perhaps I'd have been there dancing in the arms of the man I loved.

Instead, today, I find comfort dancing, hand in hand, with my fellow widows.

www.thejollydollies.com

Interview by RACHEL PORTER

together, he would hang onto me for support, and take huge, determined strides when every fibre of his being wanted to shuffle.

He pretended for all the world that everything was fine — until it simply wasn't possible to do that any more. Eventually, in 2000, he had to give up work when his speech became too slurred to talk to his clients on the

phone. We both felt that his impotence and incontinence marked the point at which my big handsome husband and I became patient and carer.

Perhaps it was the stress of his illness, which he never wanted to discuss; perhaps it was his medication, a side-effect of which was paranoia. But, slowly, he was becoming a different person.

It was only when a nurse at our local hospital mentioned in passing that he might have multi-system atrophy, or MSA, that the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Often

mistaken for Parkinson's at first, MSA is a neurological condition that also affects the parts of the nervous system controlling vital physical functions like blood pressure and heart rate.

Unnursed, fed, washed and dressed him every day — and it was my privilege to do it. Although he couldn't speak, he tried every day, and when he gathered his strength to squeeze my hand, I felt his love.

Vic died in August 2007, at home,

HAS technology turned your teenager into an unresponsive robot? Now you can use their mobile phone to get your own back. A new app allows parents, whose calls or texts are being ignored by their children, to remotely 'lock' their offspring's phones. The screen is turned black and the child is unable to use the device (other than call the emergency

services) until they get in touch with Mum or Dad. 'Ignore No More' is the brainchild of Sharon Standiford, a determined mother from Texas, who served in the Gulf War. She was so put out by her son's refusal to answer her calls that she developed her own app to force him to respond. The app costs £1.19 and is available on Android phones.

Picture: SWNS