

# Life, love and laughter... in the club nobody wants to join

At the most difficult times in our lives, it's often our friends who help us through. When she lost her husband, Yvonne Vann found her social life had disappeared - but with one great idea, buckets of courage and lots of laughter, she has started a movement, and nothing can stop her from helping other widows to have fun



Yvonne: 'So many women have lost their husbands, so let's make a new life for ourselves together'

**M**y husband, Vic, proposed to me every day for seven years - but I kept refusing. We

were both second time-rounders, and I was so afraid that our marriage would break down just like our first ones had. But one day, when we were about to go out for our weekly shop, he came downstairs in a very smart suit. He said he wanted to take me out for lunch after Sainsbury's and suggested I put on a nice dress - then he drove me to the registry office! He'd booked everything, and as he handed me the ring he'd had made, there wasn't a doubt in my mind. We got married - and then we went to Sainsbury's and did our shopping. It may not have been the most traditional wedding, but it felt just right for us. We were deeply in love, and every day I felt butterflies in my tummy just like I did on our first date.

At six foot two he was very sporty, and loved playing tennis and squash. His confident, athletic stride - shoulders down and back, chest out - felt like it



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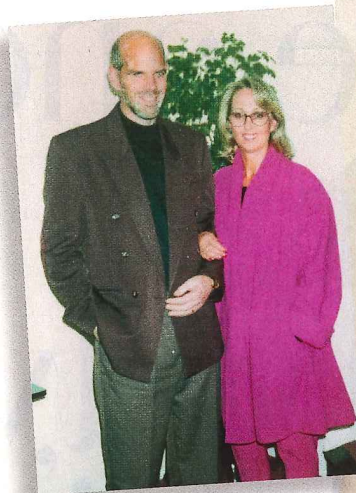
was part of me. I could've recognised it anywhere. But when he came downstairs one evening 10 years into our relationship, I noticed he was walking strangely, bent over and with his hand at an odd angle. He'd lost his sporty lobe. I didn't realise it then, but I would never see it again.

After countless tests he was diagnosed with a rare condition, Multi System Atrophy, known as MSA, which meant over time all his systems began to break down. At first he could hardly speak, then he couldn't swallow food, and eventually he was completely bedbound. I lost him centimetre by centimetre as his body failed us, bit by bit. I cared for my husband 24 hours a day and it was a privilege – but every time I thought it couldn't get any worse, it did. My friends and family were wonderful and supportive, but in the dark of the night, it was all down to me.

Partnership as most couples would know it was destroyed, but nothing could take away the passion we had for each other. Two months before he died, I remember walking past his bedroom door and catching sight of his profile as he slept. My tummy flipped, just like when we first fell in love. I still loved him then, and I still do. Not even his death, on 5 August 2007, could change that.

When he died, I was broken. There was no sense of relief that his pain was over, just sheer devastation. For the next couple of years, I didn't leave the house very much – in fact, I can't remember much about my 50s other than caring for Vic. I had no social life any more, and since I work as a masseur and reflexologist from home, I had no colleagues to chat to, either. I have very kind married friends, but I always felt like a spare part in a room full of couples. I soon realised that all my confidence had disappeared – I hadn't thought about myself for so long that I just didn't have anything to say.

That all changed when I became friends with June. She used to live in our village, and by tragic coincidence, her husband had been diagnosed with MSA a few years after Vic. Our grief drew us together and we went out a few times – we joined a walking group and even went to a t'ai chi class, anything to get us out of the house. One evening we were chatting over a glass of wine when we had a moment of inspiration.



It was Vic, above, who gave Yvonne the courage to make friends, learn skills and build a social life for widows everywhere

We realised there must be so many women out there who've lost their husbands and their social lives too, so why didn't we make a new social life for ourselves, together? June said that she knew three other widows, and we decided to make a date for everyone to meet for lunch.

The first time we met, there were only five of us, but one of those women knew three other widows, and they came along to the next lunch. Gradually, our little gang started to grow. We met up for dinner, and then joined the quiz at the local pub where we had to give a team name – one of the girls came up with The Jolly Dollies, and so our social network for widows was born. There are 20 of us now, and we have a monthly meeting over Sunday lunch with an agenda of the next month's events, whether that's a night out at the theatre or just getting together to have a cup of coffee.

Although we're not a counselling group, we can talk to each other knowing we'll be understood. I draw tremendous support and love from my daughter, son and grandchildren, but no one can understand that feeling of loss unless they've been through it.

The best part of all, though, is that we laugh and laugh and laugh, something I would have thought impossible a few years ago. I'll never forget the time we all went on a car maintenance course at our local college – we had to put on the less-than-flattering



overalls and none of us could stop giggling! Vic was absolutely mad on cars so he used to look after that side of things, and I had no idea what went on under the bonnet. None of us did really – I suppose that was just something we left to our husbands. But now – and it may surprise you to hear this – I'm a dab hand at taking a wheel off, fixing windscreen wipers and checking tyre pressure! We all can – and some of the others don't even have cars! That kind of knowledge is incredibly empowering, and it has helped me to rebuild my self-esteem as well as my sense of fun.

These friends have helped me so much, and they'll always be the founder members of our little club. Now that it's worked for us, I want to see groups like mine popping up all over the country, so I've started a website, thejollydollies.com, which will help women to find me and connect with others in our situation. Members can subscribe, and they get a pack as well as support and advice on how to organise their own group – plus a bunch of new friends. I feel passionately that we can help many, many women – the numbers of lives this could change is staggering if I let myself think about it. I couldn't even use a computer before I started this – I'd never been on Facebook or Twitter – but somehow I've found the courage and the resources to learn and start this new chapter in my life. And you know what? I feel quite proud. And I know that Vic does too. □

**'As soon as we put on the overalls, none of us could stop giggling'**