



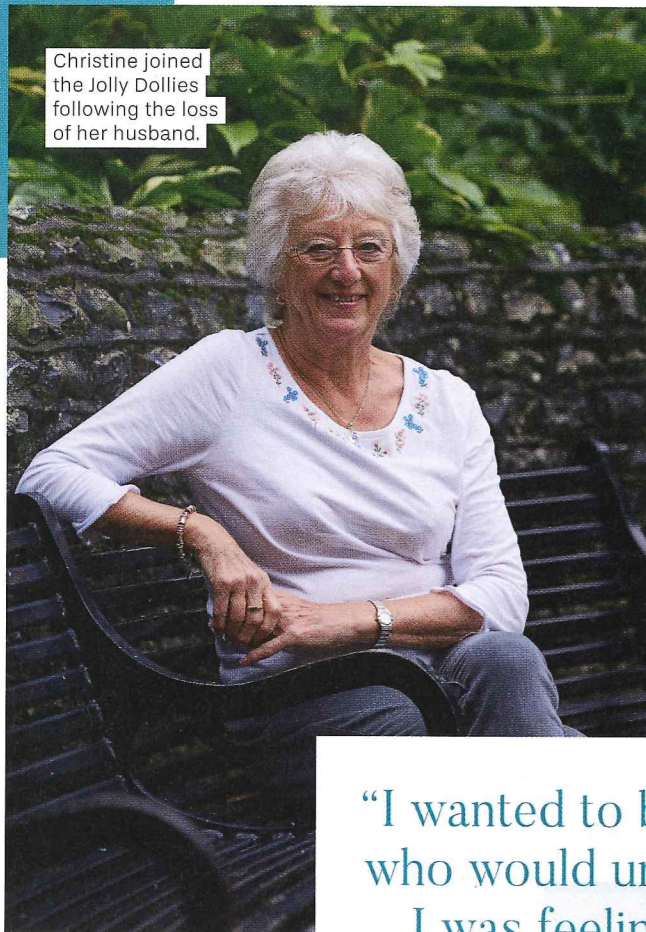
Finding joy through loss

MEET THE JOLLY DOLLIES: A NATIONWIDE GROUP OF WOMEN WHO ARE UNITED BY ONE THING — LOSING PEOPLE THEY LOVE. **GEMMA CALVERT** TALKS TO SOME OF THE "DOLLIES" ABOUT HOW THEIR COMMUNITY HAS GIVEN THEM A SENSE OF HAPPINESS AND STRENGTH THROUGH TURBULENT TIMES.

Unfolding the white paper napkin, Christine Calvert recites a poem scrawled across it in blue biro pen. "The Ladies Table," she begins, "I don't know which of you is 23, but what a lovely team you seem to be. Girls need friends to chat and call. Keep together — God bless you all! When I opened the serviette and saw these beautiful words, I was lost for my own."

Christine, from Rustington, West Sussex, was enjoying a pub lunch with a 12-strong group of female friends when a man on the next table dropped the note into her lap, then left without saying a word.

"We obviously made an impact on this man, but he probably thought we were a gaggle of old friends enjoying each other's company over a Sunday roast and a few glasses of wine," she says. "We'd been laughing and joking about being in our 20s and he couldn't have had the faintest clue as to the real reason we were together." »



Christine joined the Jolly Dollies following the loss of her husband.

“I wanted to be with people who would understand how I was feeling. The grief, even with a supportive family, can be so isolating.”

Christine and her pals are more than friends — they are each other's lifelines. A group of widows united by a shared understanding of the gut-wrenching pain of losing a husband.

But as part of the Jolly Dollies, a nationwide social network helping bereaved women rebuild their lives, members like Christine are discovering fulfilling lives after sorrow.

The Jolly Dollies — or JDs as they're more affectionately known to members — is open to women of any age, although most are 60+ and each group is limited to around 20.

For £10 a year, subscribers get access to a community page and forum, then it's up to individual groups, led by one or more coordinators, to schedule social events, which can be anything from lunches and coffee mornings to theatre trips, weekends away and even one-week foreign cruises.

Christine, 70, joined the Worthing group five years ago after her husband Graham died following a decade-long battle with melanoma.

“I wanted to be with people who would understand how I was feeling,” she explains. “The grief, even with a supportive family like mine, can be so isolating.

Nobody can understand the pain and loss unless they've been through it themselves. When I joined I received so many emails welcoming me and at my first members' coffee morning, I felt at home straight away.”

Since relocating to West Sussex last January, Christine has stepped up as the Worthing branch coordinator and seen membership numbers quadruple, largely thanks to her efforts organising a variety of activities.

“Some might assume that we mope around being sad but it's quite the opposite,” she smiles. “We're always going places. We took a girlie break to Cardiff this year, and on New Year's Eve are heading away for a black tie dinner at a nearby hotel. We're a unit and I hope that any new widows who join feel the same emotional support from us that I first received after Graham died.”

There's practical support, too. Before also relocating to West Sussex from Croydon, earlier this year, Gill Sherwood, 73, reached out to the Worthing group and met up for coffee whenever she was in the area house-hunting.

By the time she finally moved, she had a “ready-made” circle of friends who even rallied round to help her unpack. “It's been two years and five months since my husband Graeme died —

we all remember the dates — and the support from the JDs has been wonderful,” says Gill.

“Moving house was a big thing on my own but knowing I had a ready-made set of friends was very comforting. It gave me the confidence to go ahead with relocating and having four of my Jolly Dolly friends to help with unpacking was a huge help.”

Graeme died in March 2017, four months after suffering a stroke shortly after his and Gill's 50th wedding anniversary. “We were quite a social couple. I was the first one in our group to lose a spouse, so some of them didn't know how to handle it,” says Gill.

“For that first year, I didn't recognise myself. I was in such bewilderment that when I eventually started going out, I felt like the odd one out in our friendship group because they had



“The support from the Jolly Dollies has been wonderful,” says Gillian.



From top left to bottom left: Pat, Wendy, Jill, Rose, Sue, Maureen, Gillian, Diane, Marian, Christine, Julie and Sue.

their partners. This future isn't the one I expected, but I'm 100% more positive now I've found the JDs.”

Jolly Dollies founder Yvonne Vann, 72, says all women who join are comforted by the shared sense of community. “We have become singletons — and not by choice. Most JD members I speak to say they have found a sense of belonging and feel able to laugh, have fun and make some amazing friendships. It's why I chose the name Jolly Dollies — to give widows permission to be happy again.”

Yvonne, who lives in Weston-Super-Mare, Somerset, was a carer for her husband Vic during his final three years battling a degenerative neurological condition before he passed away in 2007. Initially, she felt socially isolated before connecting with another newly widowed friend.

The pair began meeting for drinks and tai chi classes and, over time, other widows in their area began asking to join in. The idea for the Jolly Dollies was born. Yvonne set up a website and the organisation now has an estimated 180 groups across the country.

“We are at ease in the company of others who, no matter what walk of life, are in exactly the same position. We can say to somebody, ‘oh my God, it's

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my anniversary this week. I feel in the pits! Sundays are horrible for many widows and that's why we encourage groups to go out for Sunday lunch. There is a huge bond of true friendship and true understanding in the JD's.”

Fife-born Maureen Mitchell, a 73-year-old living in Monmouth, Wales, admits the JDs aren't for everyone but is pleased that she persevered after an awkward initial introduction to the Cardiff Dollies five years ago. She's now the group co-ordinator.

“That first meeting was so strange,” she says. “I met two other women in a pub and the three of us had nothing in common, but I always give things more than one chance and at the second engagement — a Sunday lunch — I had a wonderful time. I've never looked back!” »

"It's given me a sense of life I thought I'd lost."



The same goes for Julie Gilchrist, 61, another of the Worthing Jolly Dollies, who stumbled across an online advert for the group 18 months ago. It was over a year after her ex-soldier husband John (aka "Gilly") sadly passed away with a brain tumour at the age of 53.

"I don't associate the Jolly Dollies with grief. We're just friends who enjoy getting together and it's given me a sense of life that I thought I'd lost. You can do as much or as little as you want to depending on your budget," Julie says.

Julia Needham, a 72-year-old JD from Braunton, North Devon, was invited to sign up after a JD overheard her in a card shop talking about her former civil engineer husband John. "I was at my lowest ebb after he died," she explains.

"One night at 5am I woke up to find him sat on the edge of our bed saying he couldn't get up. We called an ambulance, then he laid down and died in my arms. It was a pulmonary embolism. There was nothing that could be done.

"I felt I couldn't find my way out but the following March, lo and behold, came a group of women who have changed my life — changed everything.

"I've got the family support and, as a mum, I still want to protect my children from my grief, but having an independent life is also good for my own sense of self. I've learned to depend on myself more. The first time I drove to London on my own after John died was after I joined the Jolly Dollies. Being part of this network has given me confidence."

Ask Yvonne about the future of the Jolly Dollies and her answer is simple — to help as many widows as possible find friendship and understanding.

"Every time we have a new member it's a lovely feeling," she says. "There are people who it doesn't suit because being

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in a group environment isn't for them, but that's such a small percentage. I work hard and want so badly to reach all those widows who want and deserve to have a full, happy and supportive social life."

When pondering the question of what Vic would make of her valiant efforts, Yvonne smiles.

"He would have been so incredibly proud."

For more information, head to thejollydollies.co.uk



Healing process

Psychotherapist Noel McDermott says that socialising with like-minded people is hugely beneficial for those experiencing grief.

"The experience of grief can create an crisis for us, as we struggle to deal with the deeply shocking fact that a person you loved is never coming back", explains Noel.

"However, we are designed to deal with grief and loss, and Mother Nature has built into us the ability to cope with this.

"Joining a community like The Jolly Dollies can be very reparative, as this is a stepping stone to rejoining the wider community and socialising again.

"One of the things that happens when someone dies is a feeling of unique loss and damage. A group like the Jolly Dollies offers reintegration back into everyday life, but with people who are experiencing a similar loss as you.

"This can be the beginning of the healing process and the first steps back into human associations." ■