

Every day around 500 women are widowed in the UK, but a new network is helping them rebuild their lives through friendship, fun and a fighting spirit



Meet the Jolly Dollies

Words Gemma Calvert
Photographs James Ram

Clustered around a table at the Royal Horticultural Society's Rosemoor gardens tearoom in Devon, a group of 60-something women munch through a plate of sandwiches.

Laughter bounces off the walls as one explains her seven-year-old grandson's theory that 'God knows everything about everything – apart from rugby'. Another draws whoops of delight by describing the occasion she dressed up as Patsy from *Absolutely Fabulous* for a hen party – complete with fake cigarette, empty bottle of champagne and a skew-whiff beehive wig.

Anyone looking on might imagine this is a high-jinx school reunion or best friends celebrating a milestone birthday. But the smiles hide a subdued, secret connection. All ten are widows, united by the devastating loss of a husband – but each with an unshakable desire to make the most of what comes next.



FRIENDS IN NEED
Yvonne Vann (right) set up Jolly Dollie to support widow such as herself and Christine Calvert, create a new social network after the husbands' death. Preceding page: members of the north Devon group

The group, from nearby towns and villages, are part of the nationwide Jolly Dollies network, a community of widows who support each other at regular social events – from coffee mornings to DIY classes.

'It's the next step after loss,' says Yvonne Vann, who pioneered the Jolly Dollies after her husband Vic died in 2007 from a degenerative neurological condition.

The 69-year-old was Vic's full-time carer for his final three years. 'He couldn't swallow, speak or do anything for himself,' she explains at her home in Weston-super-Mare, Somerset. 'It was horrific. When he died I'd forgotten how to socialise and had lost my confidence.'

But Yvonne knew another woman, June, whose husband had died, and the pair began spending time together, going out for drinks and joining a t'ai chi class. Soon, others joined them and Yvonne realised how beneficial a widows-only social network could be.

'I thought, "If this works for us, why shouldn't it work for others?" So I launched the Jolly Dollies website,' she says. It links widows to others in their area, who organise themselves into Jolly Dollies groups. With an estimated 182,000 women widowed in the UK each year, the JDs soon caught on and, three years later, there are now about 140 groups.

Although women of any age can join, most are over 60, and each group is limited to around 20 members. 'Twenty is a great number for socialising and ensures members remain a collection of friends,' says Yvonne. 'Any more than that and it loses something.'

The annual fee is £10, for which members can access a community page and online

discussion forums, then it's up to individuals to plan social events. These can include lunches, theatre and shopping trips, and even foreign getaways. 'We have a travel agent on the website who can help arrange holidays: there are cruises to Bruges and Guernsey this month,' says Yvonne. 'Last year, a few women went to Mexico and a group from Yorkshire arranged a trip to see the tulips in Amsterdam.'

Christine Calvert joined the north Devon group just five weeks after her husband Graham, 67, died of melanoma in September 2014.

'The women I met for that first coffee said I was brave to be venturing out so soon, but I didn't want to sit at home and mope,' says the 66-year-old, who is a regular at coffee mornings and excursions.

'Last year we visited the Lost Gardens of Heligan in Cornwall and some of us went to RHS Rosemoor on Valentine's Day, because we wanted to be together at what is a particularly hard time for anyone who has lost the love of their life. I brought little heart chocolates to dish out and at lunch we toasted our late husbands.'

She has joined a bowling club after being introduced to the sport by one of her Jolly Dollies friends. 'I emailed my daughter's friend's mum after hearing she'd lost her

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◁ husband and now she's a fully fledged member of a Welsh group,' says Christine. 'I want to spread the word because the JDs have been the best thing that's happened to me.'

'I didn't just lose Graham, I lost the future that we'd planned. But before he died, he said, "If you don't go out and be happy, I'm going to come back and rattle those windows"'. Thanks, in part, to the Dollies, they've never rattled.'

For many, the Jolly Dollies offer not just emotional comfort but physical support, too. Shirley Hillier, a retired radiographer from Rochester, Kent, is one of three founding members of Kent's third group, which formed in 2013. When she fell ill last summer and needed hospital treatment, she realised the strength of her JD friendships.

'My family don't live nearby, so the Jolly Dollies were my lifeline,' says the 63-year-old, whose husband of 34 years, Robert, died suddenly on holiday in Greece in 2011. 'When I couldn't drive they took me shopping and came to visit me in hospital. I don't know what I'd have done if they'd not been around.'

Chris Webber, 67, another of the Devon Dollies, was dubious about signing up when her daughter suggested it, a year after her husband Mowbray suffered a fatal heart attack. 'I envisaged a group of widows sitting around being morbid, and that was last thing I wanted,' she explains. 'After Mowbray's death, people would ask me how I was and I'd suddenly be in floods of tears in the street, but I tried to keep myself busy from the word go.'

A year on from her first JD coffee morning, Chris is glad she took the leap. 'Most of the ladies have got past intense mourning, but if they want to discuss their husbands, people understand. Most of the time we just talk about ordinary things, just lots of conversation.'

Sue Kunc, a 67-year-old JD from Brighouse, West Yorkshire, agrees. 'We try not to talk

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about how our partners died,' says the retired teacher, whose husband Richard lost his battle with motor neurone disease in 2008. 'When you're in your own home, you frequently dwell on the past, but when you're out with these ladies it's important to pick yourself up.'

Sue has a wide circle of other friends, but says her fellow JDs understand more than others how she feels. 'I've had days when a black sheet has come over the house and I couldn't even answer the phone. I'd throw cushions at Richard's chair and say, "How dare you go!" I'd get very angry.'

'The year he died, I went out with a group of ex-colleagues and remember feeling so guilty when something made me laugh that I couldn't wait to get back home. But there's no guilt with the Jolly Dollies, because we've all been there.'

Yvonne Vann knows that the JDs aren't for everyone. 'Some say: "My husband's died. I don't feel very jolly"'. But the name was chosen to give women permission to be happy again. It's a saviour to many and it's been my saviour. It gave me a focus. It gave me hope.

'I'm now eight years on and it's still hard because all the emotions are still there. When somebody dies, you don't stop loving them.'

Yvonne glances across her sitting room to a table where a framed photograph of Vic has pride of place. 'Look, he's got that cheeky smile on his face,' she says, with an adoring expression. 'Even now, the best bits continue to shine through. And isn't that just lovely?'

Contact your local group or find out more about the Jolly Dollies at thejollydollies.com



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