

The Jolly Dollies, a society helping to connect widows, now has 70 groups around the country



‘Through our shared grief, our friendship grew’

Yvonne Vann lives in Somerset and runs thejollydollies.com

As we sat across the table from each other talking over a bottle of wine, June and I looked like old friends. But actually we hardly knew each other – instead we’d been brought together by a devastating coincidence. We were both widows.

My husband Vic was only 47 when he developed MSA, a neurological condition that damages the nerves cells in the brain. It affected his speech, his ability to swallow and his walk was reduced to a shuffle. Years later, he was bedbound.

I became his carer – feeding, washing and dressing him. As heartbreaking as it was, I’d have done it forever.

When he died in August 2007, I was bereft. And despite having a wonderful family, including a daughter and

grandchildren nearby, I’d never felt so alone. While they listened to me talk about missing Vic, how could I expect them to understand how I felt?

As the years passed, I felt more isolated. But then, in 2010, I found a lifeline. I’d first met my neighbour June by chance years earlier. She’d told me her husband had been diagnosed with MSA and I’d answered her questions. It wasn’t until we both found ourselves widowed by this cruel disease that we grew close.

Recognising the anguish in her eyes, I asked if she wanted to go for a drink and, later that day, as we sat in the pub, I spoke more openly than I had in years.

I told her everything, from the loneliness – something I’d never want to burden my children with – to how I still slept with Vic’s blue cap each night.

We’d meet each week for lunch or a coffee and soon, through friends of friends, other widows asked if they could come along. It dawned on me that there must be even more women who would benefit from spending time together.

So, 18 months ago, with my daughters’ help, I started a website to connect widows. Focusing on how important it is to stay positive, I called it the Jolly Dollies. As word spread, I’d get emails from women who, like me, desperately wanted to talk to someone who actually understood how they were feeling.

Now there are 70 groups all over the country, from Plymouth to Scotland.

They meet for quizzes, evenings at the theatre, karaoke nights or even just a quick drink.

The Jolly Dollies gave me a lifeline. Yes, I have lost my wonderful, funny, handsome husband, but I now know that I am not alone.

HAVE YOU SET UP A GROUP TO HELP OTHERS?

Tell us about your experiences by contacting us on Facebook, Twitter or by email

