

The social network: How widow Yvonne Vann got the Jolly Dollies online



By Western Daily Press

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Yvonne Vann still loves her "big, handsome, six-foot two-inch husband" as much today as she did when they first met more than 30 years ago.

Three decades later she still can't go anywhere without mentally checking what he would think of virtually every vista or make a decision without imagining what he would make of every situation she finds herself in.



Yvonne Vann, centre, who created Jolly Dollies, with from left, Pauline Luck, Sandra Bridgman, Betty Phillis and Cherry Broomfield Picture: Steve Roberts

Yet second husband Victor died six years ago after spending 13 years battling the cruel degenerative illness multi-system atrophy.

"It may sound strange but when somebody you are desperately in love with dies, that love does not die," said the 67-year-old. "It stays with you. You are still in love but there's nobody there."

Despite the best efforts of her own two children, Yvonne retreated to the sanctuary of her own home where she had so many happy memories of their life together.

Times like the day he told her to pop on a nice dress to go to Sainsbury's and she found herself at the registry office getting married.

But the more time she spent at home in front of the TV the less she wanted to go out and she was achingly lonely.

"When he died I had been looking after him for such a long time I had absolutely no idea how to start a social life again," she said.

"Just walking through doors of places was difficult. Everybody seemed to be in a couple and even though they were welcoming and sympathetic you always felt like a spare part. When you are widowed you can't get away from the fact that you are the odd one out. Women in this situation often become reclusive because they don't know what to do."

Although she continues to visit her grandchildren in Australia every year, trips out or holidays alone became painful reminders of her loss.

"I know it's one of the seven deadly sins, but you end up looking at other couples with envy," she said. "You look at couples your age holding hands or looking happy and think 'that's what I've lost'." "Wherever I go I still think 'Vic would love this' or 'if Vic was here he would be doing that'."

Things started gradually changing when she and June Owens, whose husband had died of the same condition, met and started attending t'ai chi classes together.

Yvonne was surprised to find herself laughing and enjoying life again and realised that other widows were best placed to help the 500 women who lose their husbands every day.

"When you are widowed you are thrust into this singleton environment where you don't want to be," she explained. "Most people just want to be with their husbands doing the things they used to do, but they can't. Although you still feel married, you are on your own. I felt really, really lost, as if I'd lost half of me. I was lucky enough to have an amazing family, but I still wanted to be with my husband. I lost

all confidence and did not want to go out. That's why friendship and being with women who understand is so important."

Armed with this revelation, she set up a successful social group called Jolly Dollies in her home town of Weston-super-Mare. Less than two years later, the woman who did not want to leave the house and struggled to send a text now finds herself at the head of a national network for widows which has more than 30 groups.

As well as online discussion forums and advice, members meet up to enjoy a social life which includes everything from meals out to DIY courses.

"It's not a counselling or bereavement group but it works because everybody has experienced the same sense of loss and knows what other people are going through and where they are coming from," said Yvonne. "Jolly Dollies is a great leveller. The members come from all walks of life and although we all have our loss in common, we don't just sit around talking about our husbands all the time. When we go out we discuss every subject under the sun. We have Sunday lunches where we cry with laughter, which is such an amazing thing when you think about it. It really is a lovely feeling of camaraderie."

Members are generally aged from 50 upwards but Yvonne was once able to help a 27-year-old woman whose husband had a heart attack six days before her baby was born.

"The doctor suggested medication but all she wanted to do was talk to women who had been through the same thing," said Yvonne. "Loneliness is a terrible thing and it manifests itself in different ways. Some people become reclusive but you get some women who cannot stay in, they feel the need to be doing something all the time. Lots of people going through the bereavement process turn to shopping. It's very common, but in my experience it's not the answer, it only makes you feel good for about five minutes. When you get home with your shopping bags and shut the front door behind you, you still have to go into an empty house with nobody to talk to."

Yvonne realises that technology may put people off but says learning new skills can be a real confidence booster and some of the women in the original Weston group have learned to use their late husband's tools to put up shelves, maintain cars and do jobs they would never have tackled if their spouse was still alive.

Launching the website and signing up to Facebook and Twitter was a big step for Yvonne but she remembered how she had learned reflexology and massage after giving up her office job to care for her late husband.

"Until recently I could not even send a text properly and at the beginning I was really frightened that I would wipe things off the computer," she said.

"The learning curve has been massive but I don't think women of our age give ourselves enough credit for what we can do. I'm not a businesswoman, I'm an ordinary pensioner and yet I'm doing this. It's great for women of my age to be internet savvy. When you are on your own night after night you can chat to other people on the forums.

"Everybody's experience will be different but at Jolly Dollies we never lose sight of what it's about, creating a community of women who have lost the man they love so they can support each other.

You can find out more by visiting www.jollydollies.com