

'If You Wear Black, It Must Be Sparkly...'

Gaynor Williams knows all about the grief of being widowed — which is why she set up a group to help other women, and men, in the same position. It's been a greater success than she could have imagined. Kate Corr reports

They've camped in the Cotswolds, journeyed on steam trains in Shropshire, dined out in London, and eaten more cake than anyone dares to recall. "Our gatherings and parties are becoming the stuff of legend," admits Gaynor Williams, 53. But Way Up* is a group of people (and there are nearly 300 of them) united not only by their zest for life, but by grief. For each and every one of them has loved and lost a partner, and shares a steely determination to help one another through the dark times. "I have two rules," says founder member, Gaynor. "When we meet, you must eat cake and drink wine... And if you wear black, it must be sparkly."



Gaynor Williams, 53, from Darlington, County Durham, was widowed eight years ago.

'Ceri and I been married for 20 years — he was a consultant pathologist and my best friend. He was also a bit of a keep-fit fanatic. One lovely April evening in 2003, he decided to go for a bike ride after tea. He was knocked off his bike by an elderly motorist with poor sight, who'd been told he was no longer medically fit to drive. Ceri suffered massive head injuries and died eight days

Gaynor with her late husband and best friend, Ceri



later. He was only 47.

Afterwards, despite utter despair, I felt driven to prove that I could manage on my own, and make everything all right for our children: Laurie, Scott and Owen, who were only 14, 12 and ten. I took them on holidays, I moved house and, at one point, even had 19 builders working for me! I was on autopilot, but deep down I knew I would crash unless I started to talk.

At 45, I was considered a "young widow", so I eventually joined The Way Foundation (a group for people who've been widowed before the age of 51) and found myself able to open up. But when a close friend lost her husband at 51, I hated to think she'd be excluded. After all, there's not much difference between 45 and 51, is there? That's why I started Way Up.

At first, we were a tiny

computer-based forum (I hate computers, but it was the best way to reach the most people), but when more than 50 people came to our first birthday party in Hinckley, Leicestershire, and started planning lunch parties, holidays and theatre trips, I knew we were on to something

'We can cry safely and laugh without guilt'

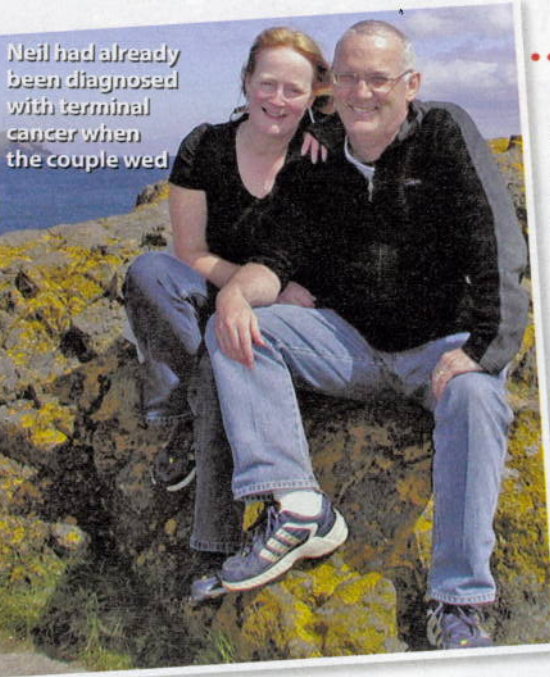
special. I felt quite proud, too.

Yes, Ceri's death was awful

and, eight years on, it's still very hard, but then, all of us Wuppers have awful stories; we've all had our lives turned upside down and we've all had desperate moments at 2am. But they're a fantastic bunch, totally mad! When we're together we can cry safely and laugh without guilt. Maybe that's why we have such incredibly close friendships: we're all trying to build new futures — together.'



Sally-Anne McWilliam, 50, from Aberdeen, was widowed last year.



Neil had already been diagnosed with terminal cancer when the couple wed

Neil and I met at work. We'd been dating only a few months when he proposed and I accepted. We'd both had a very bad year; I was getting over a divorce and Neil had been diagnosed with terminal

lung cancer. People said I was "brave" for taking him on, but I loved him. What was I supposed to do — walk away? Besides, although I knew in theory that he was dying, in my heart I still had hope.

We'd had six-and-a-half great years — more than even I'd dared hope for — and, at first, everyone said I coped very well but, as the months passed, I began to sink lower. You have this romantic idea of how you'll cope, then you find yourself in bits and

Neil had a great sense of humour. He was always laughing, singing and playing his guitar. He was also incredibly strong and never smoked, but the cancer still spread. Eventually I gave up work to care for him. He died at home in January 2010, aged only 52.

'I felt instantly included'

don't know where to turn. Feeling desperate, I started searching the Internet and found Way Up. *I don't want to be here*, I wrote, thinking nobody would ever read it. *I should be feeling better, but I'm lonely and fed up.* Someone replied in minutes: *Don't worry, I felt just the same.* Then more replies came and I felt instantly included. It was unbelievable. Everyone urged me to go to the group's first birthday party in Hinckley. I agreed, and when I walked into the hotel, feeling rather scared, a bunch of smiling people greeted me and took me to the bar.

Within 20 minutes I'd laughed, sobbed and laughed again with them. I went home feeling lighter — and that's how it's been ever since.'



Gail Baynes, 52, lives in Hull and has two daughters, Becky, 28, and Katie, 22. She lost her husband, Terry (pictured above, right), three years ago.



he went to the back door to let the dog out, collapsed and died from a massive heart attack. He was 54.

The sheer disbelief was terrible — it's as if your brain can't take in the whole thing at once. I'd been "Gail and Terry" for so long and suddenly I was just Gail. I remember looking in the mirror and telling myself: "You're a widow". Then I'd look at our bed and think, 'He's never coming back'.

But I was back at work two weeks later, determined

to keep going. It was only months later that I took a holiday and realised I needed to give myself time to think and feel. That's when I found Gaynor online and became one of the first people to join Way Up.

At the start, there were only a few of us; we were like a little family helping each other, and although my own family had been amazing, this was quite different. I remember going to a Way Up party in Derbyshire and laughing so much I was almost crying.

Then I looked around me and thought, 'These are such wonderful people.'

I met John at a group meeting. His wife, Margaret, had also died suddenly, and we became good friends. Last November, when I

slipped on the ice and broke my back, John dashed straight to the hospital to see me — and stayed to look after me for three months! He's amazing.

We share so many values, and we're now a couple, but without Way Up, we would never have met.

I loved Terry and he loved me absolutely — maybe that's why I've been able to move on, because I don't have any regrets.'

'We're like a little family'

* For more information, or to join the group, visit www.way-up.co.uk



New love: Gail met widower, John, at a Way Up meeting