

Caroline Allan

Caroline still lives on Tyneside with her two daughters and is in a long term relationship.

It is now more than 9 years since my husband Ian's death and there is not a day goes by that he is not in my thoughts. Having said that, I have managed, I believe, to build a life for myself and my daughters that on the whole is happy and fulfilling.

I am still in the same job, but it's a job I have always enjoyed and they are very understanding about my needs as regards shifts etc. I still rely heavily on my sister and on Ian's parents to care for my children when I am at work, as I work 12 hour shifts - both days and nights. A friend once said to me, 'Caroline, you do so well bringing up your children on your own after everything you went through'. I replied that I didn't have a choice as my children rely on me. She told me, 'of course you had a choice, there are those who turn to drink, those who would allow their children to be taken into care, those who would let others care for their children and lie all day under the duvet feeling sorry for themselves'. I have always felt I owed it to my children and to Ian to make sure they had as happy a life as possible. I didn't want them growing up and saying 'it was so very sad - Mum wasn't there for us and just cried all the time'. In some ways, this attitude has helped me a great deal, as I feel I have a duty to my children to be as happy as I can be in the circumstances.

I am lucky that I have a fantastic network of support both on a practical and emotional level. If my kids are happy and healthy, it is due in no small part to their aunt and uncle and paternal grandparents, with whom they spend so much of their time. However, the girls are always pleased when they get to spend time with me. Megan once told me I was her favourite Mummy. When I asked her how many she had she named her aunt and grandma! Still, I am her favourite and that is wonderful for me. There are still days when I feel down and would love the 'luxury' of sinking into misery, just allowing myself to fall into the big black hole and feel sorry for myself for a while. And there are still times when life seems to be going wrong that I have felt myself on the very edge of that same big black hole, but I am terrified that if I allowed it to engulf me, I would have real trouble getting out again. However, these occasions are becoming fewer and fewer with the passing of time.

I have accepted the new reality that is my life - it's hard work, as any single parent knows - I'm not alone in that part of my life. I used to worry about how I would take the girls on holiday on my own, but so far have never had to. I have had holidays and weekends away with friends and family and also with the close friends I have made through WAY. Joining WAY was the best thing I could have done; the support I have had just by chatting to others in my situation is immeasurable. There are a few of us who still meet on a regular basis and we consider ourselves just good friends now rather than fellow widows. I think all WAY members feel we go through different stages. The early days when we crave support; the middle stages where we **give** support to newer members; the stage where you have made your real friends among the group and need to move on. When you become increasingly distant from being newly bereaved, to the point where you can no longer offer anything, that's the stage when you need to leave WAY behind and that's where I am now.

Over the last few years, I have surprised myself on many occasions by doing things that would always have been Ian's job. I have had major renovations done to my home; a new kitchen and bathroom, I have changed my car a couple of times, renegotiated services such as the Internet and TV/phone packages. I always have my

heart in my mouth before the phone calls to set all this up, but so very proud of myself afterwards. One experience in particular was very stressful.

My children go to school close to where their grandparents live, as it makes it easier for them to pick the girls up. After Ian died, my father-in-law visited the head teacher and explained the situation. The head saw the need to support us as a family and Katie was awarded a place with Megan following at the appropriate time, as she had a sibling there. When the time came to apply for middle school for Katie, I naturally wanted her to go to the one with all her friends, and again, close to family. I talked to the local education authority about it and my GP wrote in support of my application. However, the LEA didn't feel our circumstances were special enough and placed Katie at a school a mile away and, more importantly, away from all her friends. I then had to go through the appeal process, which was one of the most emotionally traumatic things I have had to deal with. My father in law came with me and I was supported in writing by a child psychologist I had spoken to, who specialised in traumatically bereaved children due to murder or manslaughter. He kindly wrote an evidenced piece explaining the importance of keeping bereaved children with their peers and (in Katie's case) her confidante. He explained that bereaved children often confide in a friend rather than the surviving parent about any problems in their life, in order to save the latter from any further hurt, which is exactly what Katie does). The appeal was emotionally very difficult for both my father in law and me and the Chair of the appeal panel apologised on many occasions for putting us through it. However, we won the appeal and Katie got her place at the school we wanted for her. I may have to go through the same thing with Megan, as Katie will by then be moving to high school. I have since spoken to a lot of widows who have had similar experiences and wonder why authority makes us jump through so many hoops for the slightest concession.

I have never been what you would call an organised person. I am at work and I can be efficient when it really matters like nursing registration and car servicing, but if something can wait you can bet it will, and then there will be a mad rush to get it done. There is usually a panic search of the house to find whatever piece of paper relates to the situation. My house is never really tidy, but it's clean and warm and comfortable. As they get older, the girls do help; Katie is really good. She will do different chores like emptying the dishwasher and vacuuming for pocket money or top ups for her phone, and Megan is starting to do little things like fill the washing machine and switch it on; she loves to help me cook too. I do pride myself that my girls go out to school spotless every day, even if they don't come home that way! They are nice kids who have lots of friends and are achieving well at school.



Katie still has some memories of her daddy and we talk about them now and then to keep them alive. Shortly after 'A Matter of Life & Death' was published, Rachel visited me and Look North, the local BBC TV news programme did a piece on the book. They'd found a short piece of footage of Ian when he had queued up all night for Newcastle United tickets years before Katie was born – I'd never even seen the footage that they used in the feature. Katie was about 7 at the time the

programme went out and after she'd seen it, she turned to me with real hope in her eyes and asked when had the TV people filmed it. I think she hoped they had done it specially for the news item and that maybe she could go and see him somewhere, that the BBC had found her daddy. I am constantly told how lovely a child Katie is -

by her friends' parents and by her school. She is enthusiastic in everything she does and I am very proud of the way she has turned out despite the tragedy of her early years.



Megan is now 8 and less mature than Katie was at the same age. She has so many of her daddy's traits. It is easy to look for such things after such a loss, but she does things like sit on her bedroom windowsill (upstairs overlooking the patio) exactly as her daddy did as a young child. She has a laid back nature and is very likeable, but is often up to no good like drawing on newly painted walls! She is also a natural comedian like her father was before her and she brings such joy and laughter into the house. She went through a spell of calling her daddy by his first name, which I know is common among children in her situation. Family is probably the most important thing in Megan's life. She discusses family and what relation people are to us - is this person family or is that person family, how are they related to us etc. I think perhaps she couldn't relate to this person she had never set eyes on before as someone as important as a daddy. She asks more questions now than she used to. She knew the circumstances of his death before I could ever tell her as Katie has told her. She now likes to ask did daddy like this food or did daddy like to go swimming, she wants to know more and more about him, to build up a picture in her own head of the man he was. Of the daddy he was. She is very bright in the same ways he was and sometimes has a tendency to get bored in class and be disruptive as a result.



Both my children are my world and have helped me to deal with what has happened by needing me to get out of bed on a morning and forcing me to keep busy, get on with life and making sure I have a smile on my face. Without them I don't know how I would have coped with the loss of Ian.

I always knew on some level that I didn't want to be alone for the rest of my life. I wasn't always sure if I would meet anyone new, but I knew that when the time was right I would want to. I did wonder for a time after Ian died if 'Caroline the woman' was gone and all I could hope for was to be Mum forever. The first time I was chatted up on a night out I was very surprised. I sat and chatted to the man, flirting and laughing. For the most part I was thrilled that I could still be found attractive to someone of the opposite sex, but it was tinged with sadness. I went home that night having had no more than a peck on the cheek and I cried. When I first went out on a date I felt I was doing something wrong. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was a married woman and shouldn't be going out on dates. I sent a text message to one of my WAY friends and she replied I was doing nothing wrong, just different, and to just go and enjoy myself.

Today, I am in a committed relationship. Martin is someone I knew as a friend more than 25 years ago and though neither of us admitted it at the time, we both found each other attractive way back then, but thinking the other out of our league. Five years ago, we met up when both visiting our families in Scotland, and after a few drinks confessed to each other how we'd felt in the past. Although family commitments and geography prevent us from setting up a permanent home together currently, we hope that in the not too distant future this will change. My

children love him and he has a very good relationship with them - he even gets on well with my parents-in-law, who are very fond of him. His children are older than mine but are pleased that their dad has found happiness again. Martin is very understanding about my need to talk about Ian; I still have his photos on the wall. He understands my need to keep the memories alive for both my children and myself. He has visited Ian's grave with me on more than one occasion and has helped me tend it. I have even found myself calling him Ian once or twice and he finds this a compliment, as I view our relationship as similar to the one I had with my husband.

I have moved on greatly with my life since Ian died, although I have taken him with me every step of the way. I have surprised myself with a strength I didn't know I had. I have a happy and fulfilling life, although the sadness is always there if I let it in. I can't stress enough that I couldn't have got to where I am alone. I have family, friends and WAY to thank for getting me to where I am today. I would encourage anyone reading this who is having a bad time to accept help on practical and emotional levels. If someone offers to take the kids for you so you can get your hair done or go shopping or just catch up on sleep, do it! If someone offers a shoulder to cry on or be a sounding board, take them up on it, I am proof that it helps, it *really does*. There are no medals or awards for bravery for going on alone and in silence. We only have one life and we don't know what is round the next bend, we owe it to ourselves and our children to do what we can to live it to the full.



On holiday with Rachel and all our girls in 2008 (above) and 2010 (below)



Helen Trussler

Helen lives in Guildford with her new husband Neil and her two children.



We were married in December of 2005 in Edinburgh and we had a very beautiful low-key ceremony, Neil has been wonderfully accepting and supportive of me and my situation. These days, I am a full time mum to Harry who is now 7 and at junior school, and Beth who is now 12 and at secondary school! I have recently trained as a HomeStart volunteer, which supports parents who are finding life with small children a bit tough. We act as extra support, and I know exactly what life as a single parent is all about, so I hope I am helping them. Currently, I am working with a lady who is recovering from post natal depression, helping her with her twin boys who are 3. I am also looking into training to be a Doula, which is a basically another support centred job but with a wage this time.

As far as Harry and his reaction to his father's death is concerned, Harry talks about Ray in a very matter of fact of way, he carries no sadness about his father which I am pleased about; he acknowledges him in his own way. We often visit the football pitch where Ray collapsed and we sit on the bench and talk about him. Harry tells his friends at school that his real dad is dead and according to the teachers he is very comfortable talking about it. He has a very close relationship with Neil and calls him Dad. Neil has taught him all those things that I thought he may miss out on like learning to ride a bike, swimming, football, Playstation etc, so I do feel very blessed in that respect that he has had a father figure in his life to teach him all those things. However, he knows he looks like Ray and thinks it's cool that he was a train driver!



If I'm honest, Harry doesn't mention Ray a great deal, like all children he lives in the moment and is a very happy, sociable boy. Maybe things might have been different if Neil had not come into his life at such a young age, because he has only known Neil as Dad. Last year, Harry went on an aeroplane for the first time and he said in a very loud voice, "Will I see Daddy Ray from up here?", which I found quite sad, and I then had to explain that he lives way above the clouds. At times it's still very difficult.

Harry talks about death quite a lot and if he hears anything on the TV about someone dying his ears prick up. My view is that because he had to learn at a young age what death is all about, he is naturally more inquisitive about it. He asks questions such as "Where do you go after you die?", "Do you come back when you die?" and "Can Ray see me?" I try to answer as best as I can but as I do not have all the answers, it can be hard. Harry talks to his school friends about Ray, but as far as I am aware that is it, he doesn't confide in strangers or even mention Ray a lot of the time, he's a happy and content boy in his current life, without dwelling a lot on the past. I can honestly say I do not see any problems in the future regarding the children's bereavement. We have always openly talked about it and I think we have exhausted every avenue regarding Ray and his death. Harry is a very open type of boy, so I like to think if he did have a problem, he could talk to us. That goes for my daughter Beth too. She rarely talks about Ray, but she does have a picture on her



wall of them together. She says her memories have faded in the main, but she still remembers a song he used to sing to her about his old car Freddy Fiesta. He used to sing it to the tune of Pretty Flamingo whenever he was driving her anywhere and that memory remains, which I think is amazing. She tells Harry how much he looks like Ray, but that is about it. Like all siblings they spend a lot of time squabbling, but mostly they get on brilliantly.

I have a memory box which contains photos, writings and other things belonging to Ray, which I will give to Harry when he is older. We have one DVD of his dad which was filmed the Christmas before he died and we watch that together, Harry is more fascinated with how young his sister looks in it than that his father's in it, which makes me laugh. I find the DVD very surreal to watch now; if it wasn't for the fact that I have Harry as evidence, I would almost think none of it had ever happened. I don't mean that to sound cold, but it's just that so much has happened since, and the grief was so intense for about 5 years, that now my memory of Ray is quite blurred. I do remember the laughs we had and the good times though, which is really nice for me to focus on nowadays.

Even though I met Neil 2 years after Ray's death, I can honestly say I did not feel at peace with it until the 5th anniversary. It had been a very turbulent five years and



there were times I truly felt I was losing my mind. However, I clearly remember sitting on the football pitch bench on his 5th anniversary and almost breathing a sigh of relief. It felt right for the first time that he was gone, having led a very full, happy life and leaving me this wonderful gift of a child. Also, having loved him so deeply, I was now able to love another man like that again and I felt no guilt, just acceptance from him. Now I just feel very honoured to have known him, and parts of his personality live on in his son.

As to being happy, that's the big one! I would love to say that I am; on the whole I am happy with my lot, but there is a part of me that is afraid to say that I feel happiness, in case something gets taken away from me again. I have had some truly amazing times with Neil and the kids, and my relationship with my husband gets stronger very year. I have been with Neil longer than I was with Ray and that obviously does hit me sometimes. I continue to try and be a better person and the anger I held onto for a long time after his death has long since passed, thank God. My attitude towards some of Ray's friends and family can only be described as bitter disappointment, but I am not responsible for how they feel, and if their choice is to cut all ties with Ray and his son then I cannot do anything about that. The friends I have now did not, in the main, know Ray, and I feel in a way that is much healthier. I try not to hold onto the past and feel I have done well in moving on. One last personal note, coming into contact with Rachel in the early days was priceless and I will always be grateful for her advice and support. Having this book and website available is, in my opinion, fantastic. If any woman is in the unfortunate position of being widowed whilst pregnant, all I can say is, there *is* life after death and you *can* laugh again and *can* love another man very deeply and *can* be intimate again. In

time, you will feel blessed that you have a part of that person alive and showing all the characteristics of that great man you loved. Seeing my children play and laugh together knowing that they share this great bond truly *does* make me happy.



Louise Peachey

Louise has moved from Middlesex to a rural home in Somerset. She has a new partner and had a second set of twins in 2009 (pictured below).



Since the website was first established, I have kept myself busy staying at home to raise both Lydia and Amelia and earning a living at the same time by becoming a childminder. I have also been fortunate enough to form a relationship with a new man. I was very tentative and wary in the early days, but it has helped that he knew Mark and we both chose him to be a godfather to the girls prior to Mark's death. In fact, now the girls look at my wedding photos and can see Stuart in them as a guest. Luckily, Stuart is able to answer the girls' questions about their dad, and I'm glad that Stuart knew Mark too, as it means Mark isn't a ghost in our relationship, he's not an unknown force that I've placed on a pedestal and worship, with whom Stuart has to compete.

Both Lydia and Amelia now refer to Mark as "Daddy Mark". They talk about how he died and say that it makes them sad, but at the same time they also talk about him as if he is still here, or what life would be like if he joined us for very ordinary events such as a picnic or Christmas Day.



One of my main focuses in dealing with their bereavement has been in creating memories of Mark for the girls, talking about him often and trying to help them understand that unfortunately death is permanent. I also have to make it clear he didn't leave because he was sad with Mummy (like some of their friends with divorced parents) and that although he died, he died loving me and loving the thought that he was about to become a daddy. I have a memory box of things that the girls often like to sift through, especially pictures of him in his early twenties when he lived in Israel. I have also completed a memory book/albums of Mark with photos and things like theatre tickets in it and they both love going through them. We also have a magnolia tree in the garden in memory of him, to match the ones we planted at the National Trust property in Cliveden. Wherever we move, we will always have a magnolia tree in memory of him.

The girls go through a range of emotions relating to Mark's death, from it being unfair to feeling sad and angry. I often find that if they've had a bad day at school and they can't put their finger on why, they will decide to be sad as they miss Daddy. I have always been honest and answered any of their questions at a level that meets their understanding. As they get older, their questions become much more detailed, because their brains can accept increasingly detailed explanations, although it

doesn't always work - at times they understand he can't visit like divorced dads can, but at other times, they want to jump on a plane with their passports and visit him! They're still only small and some things will be confusing for a while yet. I have also learnt that I can't put off their questions to a more suitable time. If they want to announce to the world in the middle of Tesco that they wish Daddy hadn't died and why couldn't the doctors make him better, I cannot postpone an explanation until teatime in the comfort of our own home, I have to deal with it there and then.

Both Amelia and Lydia talk about Mark to people outside the family, most often to teachers or to mum who come in to school to help. For example, when telling teachers/assistants what they did at the weekend, other children mention that they've been pony riding, mine are more than capable of saying they were away visiting friends at the seaside and went rock pooling, but inevitably will come out with "Did you know that my Daddy's dead?!"

However, I don't foresee any major problems with the girls handling their situation - they will always have questions about it and when they are older, may want to know more about Mark's life before I was part of it. Luckily his ex-wife is still in touch and she has lots of photos too.

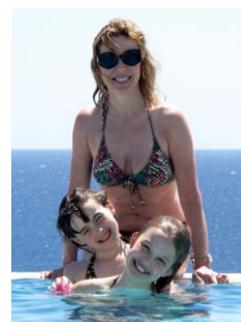
Nowadays, I regard myself as happy again, but a different type of happy to when I was with Mark. I endeavour to enjoy every day and feel settled and satisfied with the life I now have, more than I thought would ever be possible in the dark early days after Mark's death. I don't necessarily agree with the cliché "time is a healer"; I feel that time helps you cope with the different routines and situations that life throws at you. In the early days, it was like having a calendar to mark off - "well, I've survived the first week", "OK, I got through the birth without him", "Now I'm 2 years down the line", so I now have the attitude that it can't get any worse than it did when Mark died and so of course I can cope with the boiler packing up, it's not the end of the world. Despite my life moving on in many respects though, I certainly haven't forgotten Mark and never will, I think of him every day.



Cheryl Johnstone



In the few years following my wedding to Wyndham, we all settled seamlessly into family life - the children had been 2½ when we met and 4 when we married, they don't remember life before we were all together or any big change after the wedding.



We live in what was my and Glenn's home, which may seem strange to some, but I had been it for longer on my own than with Glenn. It is in a nice area and moving didn't seem necessary. It has never felt wrong. We made various changes to the house and soon after the wedding we put an extension on, so it feels

completely 'ours' now.



Catriona started calling me 'mummy' about 6-8 months after the wedding, it was totally unprompted. Alexandra followed by calling Wyndham 'daddy' about a year after we married. We let them lead on this one completely, although in another way, the issue of names has caused a lot of heartache and dreadful pain.

Following a lot of discussion and many sleepless nights, I took the difficult decision to give Alexandra my new, married surname. This was so we would all be the same, and I felt it particularly important that at school, the girls had the same surname. I didn't want Alexandra to feel she was different to all of us. Glenn's parents took this decision badly and we exchanged a lot of painful phone calls and letters. The upshot is that it is now 6 years since Alexandra has seen them.

They refuse to talk to me or respond to any of my letters. I have put Alexandra on the phone to them, which she finds increasingly difficult as she no longer knows them and barely remembers them. I have found my loss of contact with them like bereavement all over again, not to mention how totally unfair this is on Alexandra. These are her only surviving grandparents, her father's only relations - and she doesn't get to see them. She even said one year, 'if I could ask Santa for anything, it would be to see my Grandma and Grandad again.' I have wept endlessly over it. They could be helping to keep Glenn's memory alive. They could be talking to her about what he was like growing up - all the things I can't do. I have tried reasoning with them, asked them to put their feelings for me and the name change aside for Alexandra's sake, but I just get nothing in reply. It's undeniably frustrating. I am dreading the day we find out (that's if I *do* find out, if anyone tells me) that one of them has passed away.

In all of this I have to try and make Alexandra realise it isn't her fault, that they are still very grief stricken elderly people, who can't seem to deal with the situation. I have also found out they have stored up and are now holding against me many years of incidents from the time I was with Glenn, until after his death. The name change situation was, for them, the final straw. I still send them letters, just very general ones, along with photos. I live in hope that one day they might just have a change of heart.

WAY continued to play an important part in my life until 2008, when I stepped down as General Secretary for the WAY Committee. I have friends for life through this

amazing charity, which 'saved' me in so many ways. I no longer feel in touch with the members though, particularly newly bereaved members, as I have been remarried for over 6 years now, and I have all the support I need outside of WAY, with my friends and my husband.

With Alexandra and 'Little Alex' – the girls' nickname for Alexandra Green

It was Glenn's 10-year anniversary in 2009 and I was surprised at how strange I started to feel as it approached. It took me by surprise really. I have become less 'bothered' over the years with anniversaries, as I feel I can remember Glenn at many times throughout the year, as we shared so much in our 13 years together. Alexandra and I visit the grave maybe 2-3 times a year and always at Christmas. We have also gone as a family to the grave, which is fine, if a little difficult for Catriona, as her mum's grave is in Ireland.



Alexandra doesn't ask to look at Glenn's things very often at all. I talk about him quite a lot. I may say 'that was our favourite restaurant', or 'Glenn made this mirror'. I don't refer to him as 'your daddy', because he has never been her daddy, other than in name. He never got that chance. Wyndham is her daddy, the only one she knows, and he's very good at it. If she ever asked to go to his grave, talk about him or look at his things, I would always say yes. Alexandra gets upset easily when talking about loss, and will ask to change the subject. The impression I have is that she never knew him and maybe gets frustrated by talking about him. The biggest impact on her is the issue with her grandparents, and to quote her, 'Mummy, they're alive and I can't even get to see them and one day they'll be dead.' It's really heartbreaking for me to hear her speak like this. She is more affected by what they have done to her, than she is by not having Glenn.

The other thing I am very careful about is not to put Glenn on a pedestal. He wasn't perfect, none of us are. I tell her about the nice things, but I tell her the not so favourable ones too! With both Alexandra and Catriona, we try to talk about how lucky we are *now* to have a normal family life filled with fun and love - Wyndham has a saying – 'we should remember the past but not live in the past'. I feel it would be wrong to be constantly telling the children how it would have been 'if.....'

And finally....

In our family we talk openly about what has happened to us with our respective bereavements. It is something very normal to us, and completely alien to most people who haven't experienced it. The children talk to their friends, and have got used to people asking if they're twins. They now respond by saying 'we're stepsisters and it's a bit complicated!'

We are a family, albeit an unusual one, but it works and is a lovely warm feeling. I feel so thankful to be happy again, as at one time I never could have imagined being happy again.

