

Mark's Story...

It was August 2014 when my wife, Lesley, had the results of yet another scan that showed further progression of her secondary cancer and we realised she was running out of treatment options. Lesley was originally diagnosed with breast cancer in 2006 aged 43. I worked in the NHS, as a mental health nurse, for 30 years until I took early retirement to support and care for Lesley all the time. I felt it had become an impossible situation to try and continue working and look after Lesley at the same time, as it left me feeling that I wasn't doing my job properly or looking after Lesley properly – and I had no doubts she was my priority.

When I took early retirement, it had an immediate effect on me; I felt low and down because the job meant more to me than I realised. However, it was also a relief to be able to be with Lesley until she died in June 2015. In that time, I became her full-time carer and really valued this special time and felt I was lucky to be able to do it. We moved to Northumberland in 2013 and it was whilst we were staying in rental accommodation that the landlady recommended HospiceCare.

The Wednesday morning Drop-Ins became incredibly important to Lesley. She would say to me "You might think it's a bunch of people meeting at the centre who are all miserable, but that simply isn't the case." The one-to-one sessions with Sue Gilbertson and the therapeutic treatments she received each week were both very helpful. I cannot overstate how much she valued HospiceCare, and from October 2014 when I retired, we used to come every Wednesday morning because Lesley felt so strongly about not missing any of the sessions. Despite how she was feeling, she would always find the energy to go, even if it meant she spent most of the rest of the day in bed. When Lesley knew she was dying, she wanted to start making plans for her own funeral. She wanted it to be consistent with her Green values, so she researched and ordered an eco-friendly coffin made of felt.

After much thought, discussion, and a few visits to potential burial sites, Lesley decided that she wanted to be buried in Scotland, on the Isle of Arran, because it's where she spent her childhood holidays. We first travelled to the island together in 1988 with our new-born daughter, Anna, when I too fell in love with Arran. We kept going back over the years, even though it seemed to rain on every holiday, and we had such lovely memories of a carefree family life with our daughters Anna and Jo.

In February 2015, we had a week's holiday on Arran and were able to visit the church cemetery at Lochranza; it felt very peaceful and at one with nature, surrounded by the hills and wildlife. The Elder at the church was so warm and accommodating, even though, in keeping with Lesley's beliefs, the service was not going to be a Christian one. When we returned home, we set about making further arrangements for the funeral, though at times Lesley found this very hard to do.

However, she gained much peace of mind from meeting Valerie, the Celebrant, who was going to conduct the funeral service; she was able to explain her spiritual beliefs, so that Valerie could reflect these at the funeral. Lesley also met Lottie, the funeral director, and was able to explain about the eco-friendly coffin and to clarify her other wishes about the funeral.

Lesley sadly passed away on 11th June 2015 at home, in our bedroom, with me and our daughters, Anna and Jo, by her side. She was also surrounded by special photographs of our family, dog and the Isle of Arran. On the day of the funeral, 75 of our friends and family made the long journey to Arran to say goodbye. It was such a wonderfully fitting tribute to Lesley. A few weeks later, we also had a memorial service in Saltaire in Bradford, where we had lived as a family for 23 years; there were many tributes from friends and family, including poems, music, and videos.

Since Lesley died, I have attended the HospiceCare Drop-Ins from time to time, as there is a genuine sense of warmth and support. Sometimes there is serious talk, other times simple chit-chat and funny stories and of course the great thing is we share memories of Lesley; she made some good friends in the time she attended the hospice. There was never any awkwardness in the meetings; often when you lose someone people can feel uncomfortable around you, but with the Drop-Ins it felt just right. HospiceCare has been a valuable support for me since I lost my wife and gave up my job. It helps knowing that I can access their services at any time and for as long as I feel I need their support. They have a great Open Doors policy and whatever your needs are, staff will always try to accommodate, the choice is always mine. It was only in the last 10 days of Lesley's life that she was dying from cancer, prior to that she always described herself as "living with cancer".

The support we received from HospiceCare made it possible for Lesley to make decisions about her care, right up to the end." Lesley said that at the end of her life she wanted to die at home, not in hospital, and the support from HospiceCare enabled her to do this. Maxine Shell, one of the HospiceCare nursing team, was amazing and came a lot during the last weeks of Lesley's life. I cannot praise the clinical team highly enough, not only for the care and support they gave to Lesley, but also the emotional support they gave to us all.

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