

# STARTING OVER

Kerry and her children (clockwise from right) Abby, Liam and Sam.



# fresh start

Dealing with the death of a partner can be a long, hard journey. These women have learned it's possible to move on

STORY RACHEL GOODCHILD

**kerry burridge, 43**, lost her husband Don to cancer in 1996. She now lives in Tauranga with her partner Ian and their three children Abby, 7, Liam, 6, and Sam, 4. "I met Don at Auckland University of Technology – we were both lecturers there. We had been together for several years when he found out he had brain cancer. One moment he said he was feeling confused, then several hours later his speech was jumbled. There was nothing the doctors could do – we knew he would die.

We had already talked about getting married so we decided to go for it. We used our wedding as an opportunity for a final get-together with everyone we loved.

Don died seven months after he was diagnosed. I went through a fairly bleak patch for a year, then decided I needed to get away from home. A work contract came up in Niue that got me away for long enough to sort things out in my head. When I got back to New Zealand, I realised I had moved out of the depths of despair. It took a long time; last year was the first year I could say I had moved on.

It took even longer for me to be ready to have someone new in my life. There's a period of transition before you're ready for a new partner. I think it's hard on the

new person – it's like having an ex around. It can cast a shadow over your new relationship.

Ian and I had our first child a year after we met. We moved to Tauranga several years ago to be closer to our extended family. Living in a smaller city means I can chill out a little if I need to. Part of that process has been selling a business we built up together and starting up Kiwi Families, a website that supports families from the birth of your first child until they leave home.

Our children learned about Don last year. Now, the kids simply see him as an old friend of mine.

Losing Don helped me realise that people are very precious and you need to build your life around enjoying them. I definitely embrace life more because Don died."

Visit [www.kiwifamilies.co.nz](http://www.kiwifamilies.co.nz) >

## take time to heal

Time is an important healer. In the depths of grief, it can be tempting to change everything around you, but grief counsellors suggest keeping to routines and structure after a loss. Change adds further pressure and can prevent you from working out your grief.



Bronwyn credits her losses with giving her a new sense of freedom.

**bronwyn eyles, 42**, has lost two partners – the first when she was 29, then again at 37. She is now a trainee aircraft engineer at Air New Zealand. "My first husband, Rob, died of cancer. When he was diagnosed, we agreed we wouldn't look for reasons why because we knew we wouldn't find any. He died from liver cancer at 38. I grieved but, because he had been unwell for some time, his death had a feeling of closure to it.

I met Dave shortly after losing Rob and we became friends. It developed into something more about six or seven years later. I had a huge amount of unresolved grief from Rob's death, and Dave worked it out of me. Even though I had gone back to normal life, I was still carrying a lot of sorrow. Dave's support helped me face up to it and learn to really live my life again.

Although we were never engaged, Dave and I began to talk about marriage after only a year together. But one day he went off to work and didn't come back. His truck had been in an accident. Sometimes I still have to pinch myself when I think about how it happened – just like that. There was no warning, no closure, and I wasn't able to see his body.

Dave was a man who loved to live life on the very edge. I sometimes feel that he was given to me so I could learn to really live again. I want to recognise

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that gift, and my first husband, too. Now the best thing I can do is live a life that honours both myself and the important people in my life.

When I lost Dave, I found myself in a very low place. Grief is still such a taboo thing in our society. People are scared of outbursts of raw emotion and grief can bring those on like nothing else. I used to feel so conspicuous walking into a group of people, as I felt they were all so worried about how I would cope if they talked to me.

But then I began to see that my grief had given me an unusual opportunity. I was able to take some time to think about where my passion is, to think *what next?* I had found out that I couldn't have children and knew I had a chance to choose any area in which to develop skills. I began to see I was lucky – I had a freedom few experience.

So I decided, after 18 years in administration, that I would change my career. I have always loved fixing things. Even as a young girl I loved helping Dad out in the shed. So I left my job, moved cities and

### ☞ There can be real joy found through sorrow... your strengths are brought out ☞

enrolled in an engineering class. Here I was in a classroom full of mostly 17- to 21-year-old males, and I often heard: 'Why are you doing this?'

Even though it has been tough, it has felt fantastic. I feel like I've found a career I'm passionate about, which fits with my personal values. I feel lucky that even though I have been steamrollered a bit, I've seen some good come out of my experiences.

There can be real joy found through sorrow, and as you go through the fire, your strengths are brought out, as the weaknesses are burned away. My success today is due to the grief I knew yesterday.

The reality for all of us is that whoever you end up with, one of you is going to go first. It's a part of life. Facing up to losing someone is part of the process of loving, and it's something we all need to face sooner or later. I just had to face it twice, a lot sooner than most people do."

### follow your heart

Grief and difficult experiences can suppress our original dreams and ambitions. If you want to follow your passion, look to your childhood. Bronwyn found fulfilment in a new career based on the things she enjoyed as a child.

**lisa newick, 39**, lost her partner, Ewan, while they were sailing around the world together. She came home to Rangiora pregnant and grieving. She is now at university and has met a new partner, John.

"I met Ewan when he was 21 and I was 24. He was English and backpacking around New Zealand. We fell in love and, after several years, bought a house. We didn't stay long; Ewan had a burning desire to sail around the world.

We spent two years preparing, then a year finding a yacht and taking practise runs. I remember talking about how our adventure would either tear us apart or bring us even closer.

The experience on the boat was life-changing. We worked with a real synergy and became very close. We held our own private commitment ceremony and later found out I was pregnant. We were delighted.

We were in the Sudan on the morning Ewan died. It was breathtakingly beautiful. The water was crystal clear. We spent the morning sailing then, unusually for us, had an afternoon nap. Suddenly, Ewan sat upright in bed. He couldn't breathe. I tried everything I could do to save him but nothing worked.

There is no way to explain how it feels to watch your lover die and, because we weren't married, I then had to get Ewan's father's permission to sort out the aftermath. It was horrendous. No one could tell me why Ewan had died and I had to keep everything together. In the space of a few hours, I had gone from being blissfully happy to losing my love, the father of my child, my home and my occupation. I had to start from scratch.

I came home to New Zealand. I grieved but it was bittersweet – I had lost Ewan but I had a



PHOTOGRAPH: STEPHEN GOODENOUGH

Son Soren is a delightful reminder of Lisa's love for Ewan.



precious new life growing inside me. And after Soren was born, it was really tough. I had to adjust to a different future to the one I had planned. My parents were incredibly supportive, and I also networked with other widows who helped me work through the crushing pain of the loss.

Soren is now three. Last year, I felt I didn't want to be sad any more. I started a social work degree at Canterbury University and am thriving on it. Ewan was the driving force in our relationship, but since his death I have developed the motivation to get the most I can out of life. I have discovered my strengths and want to use them.

I met John in 2006, through an internet dating site. I knew I was ready for a new relationship, and I want Soren to have siblings. John and I emailed at first and when we met up, things just fitted. We're now having a baby together.

I don't feel like I have let Ewan go, but I feel that I have room in my life for other people, too. John is different to Ewan. It's hard to be the new man as you're competing with someone who can't be seen. But there's no way to compare them. Comparison can be a dangerous thing.

When your soulmate dies, you learn to hold everything loosely from that moment on. Life is precious, and for me it's all about fulfilling your passion, regardless of circumstance." ❏

### no comparison

New partners can feel the pressure of living up to the image of a lost love. Death can cause you to focus on the positive parts of your loved one and forget the things you disliked. Try not to compare – it's impossible for anyone to measure up to a memory.