

A celebration of life

Joan Kucmyda

8 September 1941 – 21 November 2019

10am 4 December 2019, Huddersfield Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Born on 8th September 1941, Joan grew up in Halifax and then Elland with her parents, John and Vera McManus. She went to Clare Hall School, and the friendships she forged there were strong ones; Joan greatly enjoyed their school reunion every year. She also enjoyed an illustrious career in the Girl Guides, achieving her Queen's Guide Award and going on to become an Akela for the Cub Scouts when her eldest son, Brian, was a member of the pack at Crosland Moor.

Joan was a very proud mum to Brian, Steven and Christopher, having met and married Tom and moved to Shepley. When she and Tom separated, Brian came to live with her in Crosland Moor, while Steven and Christopher would visit regularly. Joan worked hard to look after her boys, covering the bar at the Polish Club or working at Cliffe House in Shepley on an evening, on top of her regular job at GSM Electrical in Huddersfield. Things were pretty tight when the children were young; Joan learned to be frugal through necessity, and never really grew out of the habit. She knew the value of money, and was prepared to stand her ground publicly, once arguing with the owner of a 99p shop when they wouldn't give her her penny in change. The kids knew the rule at home: one biscuit each, and certainly not the chocolate ones! But while Joan may have been strict, she was also a very loving mum, and incredibly generous when anyone was genuinely in need.

Joan was always very outgoing; she could talk to anyone, and make them a friend. And she was a fabulous ballroom dancer. For some time Brian was her dance partner; he was too young to leave at home on his own, so Joan would bring him along to the dances at the Dyers and Finishers on Fitzwilliam Street and make him join in (something his mates ribbed him for no end). Luckily for Brian, and for Joan, of course, a friend at the dancing brought a mate of his along one night and that was when Joan met Michael. Michael said they hit it off straightaway, and by the end of that first evening he felt like he had known Joan for years. She always had such an impact, even on people she only knew in passing, and Michael was blown away by her. The two of them quickly realised they had found someone special, though as Joan pointed out, it did take Michael three years to ask her to marry him.

Marry they did, on 10th May 1986, Joan presenting Michael with a great big sign on their wedding day saying 'Under New Management'! In marrying Michael, Joan also became step-mum to his daughter, Lisa, though there was never any distinction made between any of the children. As soon as Joan and Michael got together all four of the kids were 'their children', and all treated equally.

Joan and Michael had to delay a few weeks before going on honeymoon, but it was more than worth the wait. Joan had been quite jealous when, early on in their relationship, Michael had had the chance to go on a trip to America; she escorted him down to London on the train and was there waiting for him the moment he got back, but she really wished she could have jumped on the plane and gone with him. So, when it came to a honeymoon destination, where could be better than New York? Especially as they ended up with an upgrade from their airline to BA. They had a

fabulous time, out walking the city from 8 till 8, and Joan was well and truly bitten by the travel bug.

She had always made sure that Brian got a holiday each summer, even when things were really stretched; they would go to Butlin's at Minehead, and later on all the family would go on coach and camping trips, the kids bedding down in sleeping bags in the coach aisles as they travelled overnight. But when Joan got a taste for holidays abroad, she really went for it, and she and Michael must have visited more than forty countries in all. Their trip to Kenya was a highlight; the first creature Joan sighted on the plains was a giraffe, and from then on that was her favourite animal. To some degree, it was Michael's old Uncle Demetro who encouraged her passion for travel; whenever they would go and visit him in Stoke, he would say to them, 'If there's something you want to do, don't think about it; do it.' And Joan could see the sense in what he said, so, as she kept telling the children, she and Michael had great fun spending their inheritance.

Joan loved the places she saw on her travels, but also the people she met; she would make friends wherever she went, and keep them; she valued the connections she made, and stayed in contact with families she had encountered anywhere from Russia to Antibes. When Joan and Michael got their motorhome they explored pretty much the whole of Europe, bar Greece, sometimes taking their older grandchildren along with them. Joan was a delighted grandma to John, Sam, Carl, Luke, Lauren and Joe, as well as a great-grandma in time, to Harvey, Theo and Isla; she loved them all and was certainly far more lenient when it came to the grandchildren than she ever was with her own kids; she would even buy in treats especially for them, like Luke's rice pudding. John, Sam and Carl went with their grandma and grandad to Disneyland Paris; Joan's price for taking them all there was to make them accompany her again and again on her favourite ride – It's A Small World – until none of them could take it anymore!

It didn't stop any of them turning down the chance to go to Disneyworld Florida, though, also accompanied that time by the big kids, Steven, Lisa and Lisa's husband, Richard. Joan being as thoughtful as she was, it was she who reminded Michael that his mum, Helen, had previously told them her one regret in life was never having visited the USA, so of course she and Vic were invited along too, and they all had a fabulous time.

Joan and Michael used to help look after John and Sam when they were small, and Lauren would always be round in the school holidays. She would sit with her grandma watching Bargain Hunt, or join in with Joan's favourite hobby: jigsaws. Lauren even got Joan a set of trays to help with sorting out the pieces, and Joan would always keep an eye out for puzzle designs she thought Lauren would like. She was a great one for keeping memorabilia, perhaps because she herself had such an incredible recall for people, places and events. Certainly Lisa was gobsmacked the first time she brought her partner, Richard, to meet her dad and Joan; Joan very quickly identified him as the child of her close neighbour in Shepley many years before, disappeared upstairs

and returned with a little tartan tin from which she pulled the newspaper cutting detailing Richard's birth! It's a small world, indeed.

Joan was a proper grafter; even when Michael pointed out that she needn't carry on her bar work anymore, she just replied, 'I've worked all my life and I enjoy it.' She stayed at GSM, as wages clerk, finance officer, assistant to the MD and any other role you'd care to mention, until it closed in 1995, then picked up a 12-week contract as a filing clerk at the Town Hall. Six weeks later she announced to her boss, 'I've finished,' and she really had done the work in half the time; on that basis they were very happy to take her on permanently, and she stayed working for the council until she retired.

Once Michael had also retired, they made the most of their time, not least by migrating to Spain every winter. They enjoyed many happy trips to La Manga in the motorhome, returning to the same place and making so many friends there that in the end they bought a little house on site. Joan was so glad to be able to say goodbye to the cold, rotten Yorkshire winters, and instead spend those months in warm weather and good company. Michael wanted to acknowledge the outpouring of cards, messages and good wishes he has received from their friends in Spain since Joan died; he asked me to thank them for all their support. There is such a thriving social scene in La Manga; Joan had something to look forward to every day there, from paddle tennis to crazy golf, boules to the quiz night, and she was always winning something. She gained a wide circle of friends from playing whist and crib; Michael said he felt like the invisible man sometimes, as Joan would constantly be bumping into people she knew wherever they went, but he appreciated the way Joan drew him out of himself. Joan loved to chat, and though she could be blunt, she managed to get away with it because of the warmth of her personality. And there is something to be said for knowing where you stand with a person!

Joan and Michael would also go down to Cornwall every year to visit Brian. The local community welcomed them both, and many of Brian's friends counted Joan as a friend also. Joan would save for the trip through the year by collecting every £2 coin she or Michael acquired in a jar, and it was a running joke at the place in Fowey where they would go for a meal; when it came to the bill, the waiter would bring a tray over for Joan to count all these £2 coins onto. Joan retained her love of holidays right to the end; it was she who planned her and Michael's last trip, riding through the Austrian Alps by steam train.

When she and Michael were at home in Almondbury, Joan liked to keep cosy, settled down with a book, or her Sudoku or crosswords. Though not a dog lover herself, she was always happy to look after Lisa's dog, Saffie, even when Saffie was then joined by Arnie. But it was Lisa's third canine companion, Dexter, who really stole Joan's heart; from then on, she was never going round to see Lisa, but to visit 'her little friend'. Dexter used to sit on Joan's knee and just gaze into her eyes, and she gained so much pleasure from all three of the dogs.

Michael freely admitted that everything in the household ran smoothly thanks to Joan's meticulous organisation. She had her routine, and she stuck to it; even in Spain, Thursday was the day for shopping and errands. Michael could never find himself at a loose end, either, as Joan always had a jobs list for him; he couldn't fathom, though, why the list never seemed to get any shorter, until a friend advised him to start crossing things off from the bottom, not the top, so she couldn't add any more on. Joan did organise things to great effect, and even since she died Michael has still had occasion to be thankful for her managerial skills, from the ordering of their finances to the wrapping and labelling of everybody's Christmas presents.

Joan loved to have everyone together at Christmas, though didn't enjoy so much the cooking of Christmas dinner. Cooking in general was not her forte; the grandchildren soon learned to always check the underside of their toast for the burnt bits. This year's Christmas cakes didn't fare too well either, but Luke saved the day and made one for his grandma instead.

It's impossible to sum up Joan's life in fifteen minutes, just as it is impossible to put into words everything Joan was to each of you, but when I asked her family for a description of the kind of lady she was, their answers say it all: loving, kind-hearted, compassionate; someone to turn to; 'if you were down, she would lift you up'. Joan may have had one or two funny ways, but don't we all? And she livened up any room she entered, even the hospital ward at HRI where she was treated at the end. Michael said the nurses on Ward 17 were like angels, and he could not have wished for better care for Joan, but they gained something too, from the time they spent with her. Right from Joan's diagnosis three years ago, she was determined not to let cancer beat her, to live every day of her life to the full; many who saw her would not have even known she was ill, and those who did know could only admire her bravery.

Joan was a great friend, and a wonderful mum and grandma. And she found her soulmate in Michael, who told me simply, 'You don't know what you've got till it's gone.' But both he and Joan did know what they had, and how good it was, just as all of you know how your lives are brighter for having had Joan in them.