

A celebration of life

Jennifer Watts

4 January 1943 – 20 December 2020

12-1pm, Tuesday 19 January 2021
North Oxfordshire Crematorium



a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

Jennifer's life

Jennifer was born in Tonbridge in Kent to parents Betty and Alan on 4 January 1943 – a wartime baby. The Battle of Stalingrad was at its height, the film *Casablanca* was about to hit cinema screens, and Frank Sinatra had just performed his first solo concert.

Because of the dangers of being close to London, shortly after she was born, Jennifer and her brother Robert moved with their mother to live with relatives in Banbury. It was a wise decision, since the following summer the family's home was destroyed in a bombing raid, killing Jennifer's grandmother.

Her father Alan was in the Army – working on secret electronic and radar systems, after which he was posted to Holland. So Jennifer and Robert spent little time with him until well after the war, when they were surprised to suddenly find 'a man in the house'.

In 1957 the family moved to Earley just outside Reading, for Alan to take up a teaching job at Wargrave School near Henley. Displaying her intelligence and drive, Jennifer won a scholarship to the Abbey School in Reading, and then moved on to Marlborough Grammar School in Wiltshire for her O- and A-level exams.

From there she went to Cheltenham Teachers College, but decided against a career as a primary school teacher in favour of becoming an accountant at the Caley's John Lewis store in Windsor, near to the castle. The photo of Jennifer here was taken around this time, when she was 21.

Jennifer married her first husband, David Williams, in 1966 and they moved to Erdington in Birmingham, where she worked at a building society until the arrival of their first daughter, Clare.

Lorna arrived a couple of years later, then the family relocated to the school-house at Combe School next to the Blenheim Estate, where David became head teacher and Jennifer the school secretary. Martin was born here to complete the family, who then moved again to Kidlington when David took up the headship at Yarnton School.

Martin – I understand your childhood health meant that you lived and learned at a number of schools and colleges in different parts of the country – from the Midlands to Kent and the West Country.

This allowed Jennifer to take on various part-time jobs, making the most of her numeracy and organisational skills. She also became a passionate advocate and fundraiser for charities working with people affected by loss of sight and hearing, and was fluent in British Sign Language.

After settling in Oxford, Jennifer worked for the retailer *Pastimes* in Witney, plus Oxfam, Oxford Examinations (where she met Michael), the Oxford Chamber of Commerce, d'Overbroeck's College and finally in the chief executive's office at the County Council.

Just think about all the people's lives she must have touched in those different roles – people far away suffering from poverty and conflict, students, pupils and the public. Most of them would never have heard of Jennifer – still less met her – but she helped them all: a true servant.

Jennifer's work and her involvement in campaigning for the rights and interests of people with deafness also brought her into contact with one of the city's other great institutions: Colin Dexter, author of the *Inspector Morse* novels. Clare will talk about their friendship later.

As the photos and Jennifer's drawing in the order of service show, she loved being around cats – like Debba, Dandy, Minky, Poppy, Twink and the white-socked Lulu.

Jennifer's artistic skills are just one of the long list of things at which she excelled. Again Clare will say more about these shortly, but it seemed she could just *do* things, and usually do them very well.

Jennifer also enjoyed travel. She and Michael visited virtually every part of Britain and took regular holidays to France, Germany, Holland, Austria, Italy, Spain, Madeira, Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. And she took part in rallies across Europe in her dinky, silver Suzuki Cappuccino sports car.

When this was first mentioned, I had to Google what this little car looked like. And I can see why Michael's father described it not so much as a vehicle you *got into* as "put on." It seems like the perfect choice for Jennifer – compact, eye-catching, nippy and fun.

Jennifer and Michael lived together from 1983, were married in 1994 and remained at their home in Tackley until early 2019, when the effects of Alzheimer's disease meant that she needed specialist care. This was provided with love and dignity by the amazing team from the Orders of St John Care Trust at Townsend House in Headington.

In earlier days though Jennifer played a big part in local life as a volunteer: monitoring the stock at the village store and working as treasurer for the Village Hall committee. She didn't sit back and wait for others to take responsibility for things, she stepped up and got on with them, with all of her trademark energy and thoroughness.

Jennifer died peacefully just before Christmas, with Michael at her side. Over the past year, we've become used – perhaps too used – to being told about the numbers of people dying from COVID-19 every day in the news. And sadly, Jennifer was among them.

So let's make sure her story reminds us that behind every single one of those statistics is a person and a life to remember and value.

What matters when someone leaves us is not that they've died, but that they've lived, loved and used their time and gifts well. And from what we've just heard, we can be sure that Jennifer did all that and much more.

From husband Michael Watts

Last Saturday, early in the morning, I listened to a Radio 4 programme from Somerset about the breeding of snowdrops. Snowdrops are just coming into bloom now. Jennifer would have loved to see them. Some are growing in the corner of her tiny front garden, and have just bloomed on the grassy bank in front of the St Nicholas Tackley church.

Welcome to you all, and especially so during this cold and inhospitable winter season of Coronavirus.

It is particularly sad that my niece Jayne cannot be with us because she is looking after her vulnerable family down in Hampshire. Similarly, her youngest granddaughter, Freya, is in isolation from Coronavirus, but she is in the nearby car park now. Both send their love and best wishes to us all.

You will know and understand that all this is difficult and painful. So I will keep it brief and focussed.

Our Celebrant Ian here has done wonders in painting Jennifer's life, merely based on my scriblings and as edited by Clare and Lorna. Thank you Ian.

Jennifer looked after me when I was extremely vulnerable back in the autumn of 1980. She was my harbour of safety... She was buoyant and fun, she had blue eyes, and I even bought a large Citroen car of that same colour to match her eyes at the time. She both cared and loved strongly.

She strove to follow the Hughes family tradition and aspired to being graceful. She was very proud of her three growing children, and never ceased to chatter about them.

Jennifer hardly ever complained, and seemed to have a very high pain threshold, even during the three miscarriages that we shared and, more recently, breast cancer. She was very aware of her Alzheimer's, but only broke down on three occasions to tell me that she wasn't right.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and, with this magic, I should have anticipated Jennifer's illness at least a decade earlier from her occasionally unusual behaviours. So, all you good people, don't be afraid of getting early diagnosis and treatment for anything untoward, the earlier the better for yourself and those close to you. Diagnosis is everything ...

Especially I would wish to thank Dorte Chandler and all her colleagues at the St John Care Trust *Townsend House*. They looked after and cared for Jennifer wonderfully well over almost two years. One of their staff gave Jennifer a beautiful all-singing all-moving doll which Jennifer cherished dearly. She nursed it continuously, spoke to it, and even occasionally chastised it for being naughty. This doll wonderfully replaced her affection for her cat Lulu – the tabby cat with four white paws, who is now 19 years old, still fit and well.

It would not be an exaggeration to tell you that Jennifer was very happy at *Townsend House* where she was loved and kept safe. The staff fully appreciated her smiles and weird chatter. They also made me very welcome at each of my many visits – even during these very challenging Coronavirus times.

Thank you again for being here today, and for sharing all this amongst friends.