

A celebration of life

Gaye Elizabeth Whistlecraft

5th December 1957 – 1st October 2020

This tribute was written by Felicity Harvest (Humanists UK Celebrant).

An abbreviated version was delivered at Worcester Cricket Ground on 13th September 2021.

a personal goodbye

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Remembering

Gaye Elizabeth Whistlecraft

5th December 1957 – 1st October 2020



This tribute is based on the memories of :

Bruno Bohane

Joan Bohane

Nina Bohane

Phil Bohane

Wendy Bradley

Jean Brown

Nicki Bruce

Jacquie Eldridge

Ben Hampton

Sam Hampton

Frances Howie

Shirley Sanders

Caroline Smith

Jack Whistlecraft

and

Robin Whistlecraft

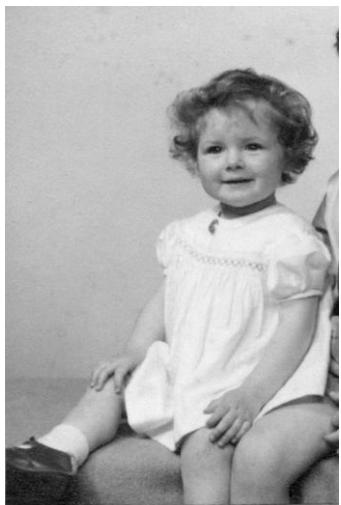
As told to

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Gaye Bohane was born in Tunbridge Wells in 1957, the youngest of three children. There was less than three years between her and Phil and Bruno, her brothers, and as a result they were always close, and Bruno and Phil were very protective of her. Phil said “*Although we were bought up in post war austere times we were happy, surrounded and mentored by three older generations of family who spoilt us with time, and old time kindness. Gaye was never more than a couple of steps behind us in our early young adventures.*”



Their mother, Joan, was born in France of an English father and French mother, which gave them all the opportunity to spend many holidays in France through out their childhood. They all had happy memories of special Christmases, and long summers on hot sandy beaches playing and learning to swim at “Papi and Mia's” home on the Med. “*Gaye was one of our gang. Always smiling and happy and hanging on to our shirt tails.*”

When Gaye was three, she befriended a white stray cat, which she named Tinker. This started a love affair with felines, which stayed with her all her life. Tinker was with Gaye till she left home. And her parents set her up with other passions and habits too. Her father’s wonderful garden, with its pond, no doubt inspired Gaye’s love of gardens and gardening, and from her mother she acquired her passion for cooking, and in particular her skills in creating French dressing!



Phil and Bruno describe those early days at home as idyllic, with home-made go karts, bike rides, picnics, and tree camps all of which Gaye was energetically always part of. She was quite the tomboy, and although she was tiny, she was very strong. Close friends, like Nina and Nicki, that they made at that time stayed with Gaye right to the end.



Nicki Bruce was Gaye's friend from when they were both six months old. They lived in neighbouring roads, just a short walk from each other. As Nicki put it, "*We grew up together and our family seemed to be hers and her family was part of mine*". They spent a lot of time in each other's houses and gardens, and with Nicki's horses, Khamoun and Dusky, either in Kingswood field or down in Camden Park field, where they also spent time pond dipping and riding their bikes.



Nicki joined the family camping in the New Forest, where her memories of Gaye are always of lots of laughter, and lots of meat. She'd eat lamb on the bone, nibbling to get each piece off. That passion for meat on the bone is a recurring theme with the people who remember Gaye – Ben and Sam in particular remember her chewing right down to the marrow.



Then there was Nina. Nina and Gaye met at junior school when they were about 10, their friendship starting when Gaye decided Nina's school bag was a mess and needed a good sort out. This urge to help people be efficient and successful is another theme which will unfold further as her story progresses. They spent much of their time out of school together and enjoyed their teenage years, starting with the youth club and graduating up to discos and night clubs.

And then there were the holidays – something else which will crop up throughout this story. Nina remembers: "*I joined Gaye on a Cornwall holiday when I had my first taste of cider, she never let me forget the resulting escapades and continued to entertain everyone with the story on a regular basis. She came to Blackpool with my family, we were very excited to be*



booked into a separate room and all the freedom this was going to give us but due to a mix up all 5 of us ended up in a small family room. It turned out to be a lot more fun with so much laughter."

Jacquie, another teenage friend, was one of the many people who used the word "vivacious" when describing Gaye – together with "daring", "inquisitive" and "caring" – also words which came up again and again. And "cheeky" and "full of fun". Gaye and Jacquie met through teenage boyfriends, and soon developed a strong relationship. Jacquie was a couple of years older, and passed her driving test first, so Gaye used to get her to sit with her while she raced around in her beloved bronze Hillman Imp.



They went to Corfu and together, where Gaye lured Jacquie onto the back of a motorbike for the first and only time. They played squash together, and when Jacquie got married, Gaye was her chief bridesmaid. Later they were godparents to each other's oldest children.

Meanwhile, Nina had married and moved to South Africa. Gaye promised to be their first visitor and to arrive on their first wedding anniversary. A year of hard saving later and she made it for a month's stay. Nina took her everywhere. Gaye was aware that the wild life could be risky and maintained a healthy distance from spiders and other unrecognisable bugs until one day, when driving around the Kruger National Park, they drove too close to a bush. Her window was open and resulted, to her horror, with her being covered in ticks. She tried to brush them off but in a panic ended jumping out of the truck and stripping off. Nina was laughing too much to be of any help.



Later, Nina returned home from South Africa alone, widowed. She said “*Gaye was the best support I could have during this time. She lent me her car whilst I looked for one of my own enabling me to get to work. She was part of all the jobs on my new flat but often caused extra work, on one occasion using her paint roller on me rather than the walls, then expecting me to buy her supper.*”

That Hillman Imp was just the first in a long line of cars. Gaye loved driving and was a very good driver but fast. Nina remembers holding onto the door handle as she was speeding around bends, much to Gaye’s amusement. Before her first marriage, Gaye worked for Mazda cars, and her role on the import side included driving cars to various US airbases. But Mazda had a policy against employing married women, so she had to leave. She continued to enjoy driving all her life, though her boys recalled that she occasionally had a few points on her licence.

Because Gaye gave so much to people, she always got lots of support in return. When Ben was born, he was very fretful in the evenings, and Jacquie used to go round every evening so that Gaye and, her then husband, Mark could eat.

Ben and Sam, Gaye’s sons, remember that they thought she was rather strict when they were growing up, but now they realise she was really just intervening for their own good – or for the good of her beloved garden, as they kicked balls about and punched ad-hoc holes in the garden shed to create “windows”. But she knew boys would be boys. When

Ben broke a window when he was running up the garden wearing oversized wellies, she chose to believe it was an accident and bought him a bag of sweets.





Her strictness extended to chasing their schoolwork, but she also took up the cudgels on their behalf. When a teacher said at a parents' evening that Ben's work in his maths class was not up to standard, Gaye's response was "Well what are you doing about it, then?".

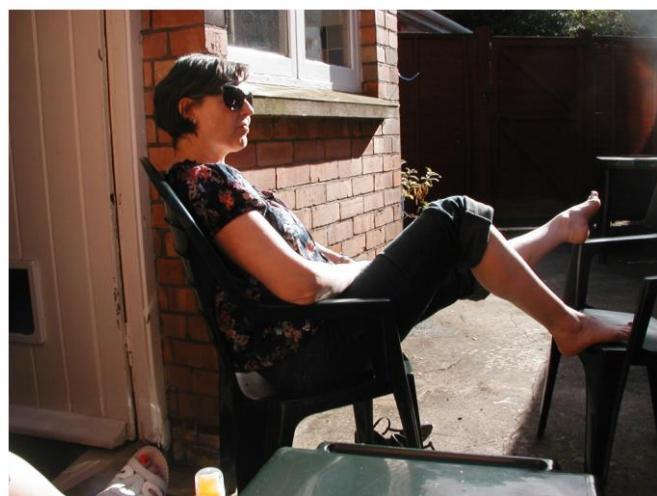
And they remember what a great cook she was, how much she loved that meat, but also seafood, and the great salads from the garden. And of course the family holidays, in hot places, in the Caribbean, Greece and Turkey. Gaye was a great sun-lover, but she never, ever got tanned.

Though the move to Worcestershire meant leaving many friends behind, they all kept in touch with Christmas and birthday cards, and the occasional phone call and visit. Nicki said: "*My friend Gaye, we didn't see each other for years at a time but it didn't matter. We always managed to take up the conversation where we left off!*". And Jacquie talked about them being in touch more actively at the time when both their fathers died.

Gaye created another of her lovely gardens in Worcestershire, again with a pond. Ben and Sam remember the day when Lottie, then the resident cat, mistook the weed on the top of the pond for nice green grass, and plunged straight in.



And it was at the school gate at Martley Junior School that she met the other Lettuces, Shirley, Caroline and Wendy. So why were they called the Lettuces? Well, it all started when a group of seven friends were going to Caroline's house in Maenclochog in Pembrokeshire. Caroline was trying to explain to her daughter, then five, that it wasn't the kind of holiday children went on, it was just "for ladies". Oh, said her daughter "You mean like the ladies at Jane's house, the Lettuces?", referring back to a conversation she had heard – or misheard – about a group of lesbians. From then on, they



were the Lettuces, and Gaye, Shirley, Caroline and Wendy were the core members of the group. To give a flavour of the life of the Lettuces, here's a poem by Shirley, and there'll be another one by Wendy in a minute.

*My wonderful fellow lettuce Gaye
How can I convey
The feelings I have
That you've been taken away?*

*We saw lots of gardens
We had lots of fun Then
we went to the café For
a chat and a bun.*

*We rode our bikes
We saw the sea We
put up our tents and
had afternoon tea.*

*We had lots of laughs
And did things together
We made lots of memories
That I will treasure forever.*

*We were part of a club
Exclusive to us
Lettuces on tour
Did things that could not be discussed.*

*I just want you to know
Its ok to cry
This isn't the end
Its only goodbye.*



They spent many happy times together in Pembrokeshire, consuming Maltesers, cake and alcohol to the strains of Abba. And they laughed all the time, whether it was at a leopardskin bra, or the mountain of cheese which Gaye arrived with on one occasion. Not that they sat in eating and drinking all the time – sometimes they went quad biking (“Oh, the mud! Still, it is good for the skin”), and once they went on a speedboat round Ramsay Island, terrorising the nonLettuce passengers with their squeals and laughter. After the boat ride, and the 230 steps up to the top of the cliff, they found they had a car full of cheese but little else, so they drove into St Davids to top up their food supply, and Gaye sunbathed in the car park, eating – what else but - cheese.



They picnicked on Strumble Head, where once they climbed up on a wall and couldn't get down again, without falling into the gorse – not the only gorserelated incident which happened during those visits.



They also loved Newport Beach. There was parking on the beach there, but once Caroline ventured on in her husband's new car, and it started to sink into the sand. Shirley and Caroline felt they had the matter in hand, putting driftwood under the wheels, but Gaye had other ideas. She suddenly popped up in a red swimsuit, looking sensational “like something out of Baywatch” and siren-like

lured 3 men over to help them out.

As Caroline wrote: “*Our trips were life affirming; days spent enjoying each others company and having fun and forging a friendship that has proved to be special, not many people have the privilege of such a strong friendship that is supportive and loving and golden for us all. Gaye you were a huge part of this*

*your cheeky smile and your practical ways and your ever ready listening skills
were appreciated by us all. “*

They went with a crowd of others to France for a week to celebrate Caroline's 60th. There Gaye pulled out all the stops with the French cooking she had learned from Joan, and taught them all to make French dressing, wearing nothing but a swimsuit and with several pina coladas already consumed. And she made artichokes for everyone, a first experience for most there, dipped in pounds of melted butter.

At home, they met up in garden centres for coffee at 10am, would realise all of a sudden it was noon, and that they'd better go round the garden centre quickly because it was already time for lunch. And for Gaye's 60th, Shirley hosted a girl's weekend at her farmhouse, complete with a visiting beauty therapist. Gaye never took things like this for granted though, she always appreciated being spoiled. And they cared for each other equally – when Caroline had a heart operation, Gaye was at her house when she got home, on her way back from work, with a bunch of flowers, making sure she went straight to bed.

Wendy wrote this poem on behalf of the 3 of them, to celebrate their “Little Gem”

When we think of you Gaye

*When we think of you Gaye, we see a garden
A vibrant vision, feminine and fragrant
Rioting, abundant intense colour
That shines with brilliance
Radiating your elegance, vitality and charm*

*Heady perfumes invade our senses
As we think through the decades
Of sunflowers standing tall
Proud, golden and distinctive
Adoration and dedication for your boys*

*Dainty white jasmine pervades the air
Affectionate, pretty, modest
Offering its friendliness to
Bright gerbera and chrysanthemum
Irrepressibly cheerful*

*Roses in full bloom signify love
In all its various forms
Sunny yellow friendship and care
Passionate and energetic clashing orange
Unmistakable beauty of deep red admiration*

*Aromatic herbs in a sunshine haze
Garlic bulbs, zingy citrus lemons
French artichokes upright in the borders
Skillful gourmet culinary delights
Enjoyed with wine and Malteser laughter*

*Evergreen friendship lasting through eternity
Pembrokeshire memories, pure and strong
Our gratitude for an enduring bond
A heartfelt declaration of love
That you will remain so very dear to us*

Farewell, little gem

Gaye stayed at home when the boys were small, and her first foray back into the world of work was as a night-carer in a children's boarding school. It was perhaps that which influenced her to apply for a job in the team which inspected children's establishments, joining them as a senior clerk. And it was there, in 2000, that she met Robin. The team had expanded, and needed more support, and Gaye provided it. She was fun, but she was firm, cracking the whip when necessary over Robin and the Inspectors who worked with him.



Then the inspection function was outsourced to a series of quangos, which Gaye didn't enjoy, and she went back to work for the Council.

A couple of years later, after both their marriages had ended, they bumped into each other in a bookshop in Worcester. He was buying a book for a rugby club friend's birthday, and they got to talking about rugby and found they had a shared interest. He had a season ticket to spare, and he invited her to a match, and that turned out to be a first unofficial date. When they had their first proper date, at a restaurant, son Ben was somewhat concerned about his Mum going off with this stranger, and followed them for some way when they left the house, to make sure that she was safe.

Robin has a clear memory of the moment when he first realised he loved Gaye. They were sitting in the car at the foot of the Malvern Hills, just about to set off on a walk, when he got a phone call. As she waited for him to finish, he noticed her grinning at him, her face illuminated by the sun. And that was when he thought "I love you".



The other Lettuces thought he might feel threatened by Gaye's closeness to them, but Robin entirely accepted it and happily waved her off to Pembrokeshire each time. And they launched her into marriage with their usual style, at a weekend away at Dunster which was also to celebrate Shirley's birthday, when for an impromptu hen-night Gaye wore a pink cowboy hat and tutu, then began to circulate the tutu round the rest of them, and suddenly the waiter started wearing it too.





Gaye and Robin married in 2011 in Tunbridge Wells, and had their reception in Phil and Nina's garden. Jacquie commented how radiant Gaye looked, and how happy Robin had made her.

The Lettuce's remarked on what a positive impact Robin had on Gaye's life. The twinkle came back to her eye Robin and Gaye were close, described once as 'joined at the hip'. Robin remembers them holding hands, whenever possible, whatever they were doing. Others have said they were 'made for each other' and

looked so 'happy and relaxed together'. Even while Gaye was in the hospice a chaplain commented that their love for each other was 'a presence' that was 'palpable' to the staff around them.



Back in Worcester, they had moved into his house. They did it up and extended it together, Gaye leading the planning with her usual efficiency and dedication. At the renovated house, she designed the garden from scratch after it had been completely destroyed by building the extension.

Once finished, it was small but wonderful to them, and Robin has fond memories of them sitting together by the pond enjoying a glass of wine in the evening sunshine. They stayed there until 2018, when they decided to take early retirement and move down to Tunbridge Wells to support her mother, Joan.



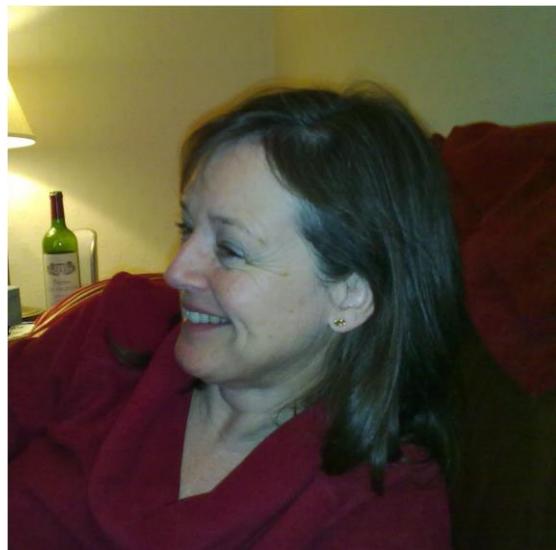


She also helped Shirley design her garden, not only researching the plants and producing a list, but helping her dig it over too.

She continued to support the boys as they grew up. She was really fond of Ben's partner Elisa, and was always urging Sam to "get back on Tinder". Her last boss, Frances, remembers how she "glowed with pride" when taking about her boys, and how lovely they were, and Frances added "of course they were lovely, because they were hers." Robin recalls how Gaye grew closer to his son, Jack, valuing how, after Gaye's father died, he shared his experience of the death of his mother with her.

Ben and Sam remember the years that they spent Christmas together as adults, including all the rituals, starting with bucks fizz and smoked salmon, then going on to a beef fillet roast instead of turkey. They would eat and drink until they couldn't move, then Jack, Ben and Sam would revert to their childhood ways and get out the nerf guns, always taking time to use Gaye and Robin as sitting targets. And then the boys would end up wiped out too – one year Ben was found in a kitchen, fast asleep in a chair, leaning against the fridge, with a cat on his lap. These Christmas gatherings were very special for Jack too. "*Christmas was always a special time for us, as we all got together, often including the boys' or my girlfriend. Everyone was always made to feel incredibly welcome and Gaye made sure we were suitably well fed and watered.*" They continued to have these Christmases together in Worcester, even after Gaye and Robin had "left home" to move to Kent.





Gaye's cooking and hospitality are a common theme in this story. Gaye was a fabulous and talented chef and Robin, Ben and Sam, all top fans. Food and good cooking was a common denominator of all she did, always social plans revolved around recipes and great food. At parties and family occasions, her family and friends always had huge appetites when Gaye was at the helm. And she enjoyed good company, and the hospitality of others. Jean remembers her passion for rugby, curling up on the comfy settees and watching a rugby match - usually with a box of chocolates that they passed round until they were finished. And going to Sixways to watch Worcester Warriors and the enjoyment they all got from seeing a live match although their results were not often a reason for laughter

Meanwhile, Gaye's working life had continued to blossom. After she returned to Worcestershire County Council, she later became PA to the Director of Adult and Community Services, and then to the Director of Public Health, Frances Howie. Although her title was PA, her work in fact went much beyond that, and she led the Business Support function for the Directors. Frances remembers her as a high-performing professional who was the cornerstone of the team. She set the tone for the office. In the morning, as soon as Gaye's coat was on the hatstand, there was no more chatting – you'd sit down, log on and get on with the day. Gaye could create order out of chaos, and was very clear that there was a right way to do things, and a wrong way to do things. When Frances was preparing to recruit her successor, she asked Gaye what makes a good PA. Her answer? "Taking everything away from the Director apart from being the Director" – and that's just what she did. She was efficient, of course, but she went far beyond efficient, because she understood the point of what she was doing.

But she was also extraordinarily kind, caring about the people she worked with, remembering birthdays, being aware when there were things outside the workplace which were affecting them. She'd draw Frances' attention to these things, getting her to sign cards, saying to her quietly "I don't know if you're aware, but...." She was a great colleague, as Frances herself found out when her own mother died. But of course, she was always fun.



Other colleagues remember her warmly: “I have so many happy memories of working with Gaye over the years.... We had tears, drama, and loads of laughter amongst the work... and she brought in a ‘Tea-towel’ rota.... which we did not embrace to begin with!!”, “Gaye was a lovely woman - always friendly and helpful and willing to steer a young council newbie in the right direction” and “I have many fond and happy memories of Gaye - particularly her twinkly blue eyes, broad smile and mischievous nature!”



As a treat after her retirement, and in recognition of her service to the County Council, Frances put her name forward for the Buckingham Palace Garden Party. So on went the fascinator, and off she and Robin went – Robin on strict instructions to wear a tie, and behave himself if they got anywhere near any Royals.

And how they were going to enjoy their retirement! There was the chance to be really close to her family again, and they made the most of it. They bought a campervan, planning to take many extended visits to Europe and around the country. They acquired electric bikes and together they rode for miles, often ending up at a good pub. They visited National Trust gardens, and managed to go to a music festival in the campervan before she became too disabled.

Gaye loved gardens and gardening, but taking on her mother's was a huge commitment, including rebuilding the large pond, mowing a huge lawn on a powerful ride on mower, and re-roofing an old garage her father had built years ago. All done in the first year of moving in. Gaye was strong, capable and full of common sense. She had enormous energy.

But on their very first long trip in the van in early 2019, Gaye started to get what they thought were migraines, but after they got worse on their return, she was diagnosed with a brain tumour.

Gaye had always had enjoyed good health, so it was a complete shock to everyone when her diagnosis came through in March 2019. Her journey from then on was driven with strength, internal resilience and immeasurable amounts of fortitude. Gaye was understandably continually challenged emotionally but rarely showed it. Her self discipline was held up by smiles, old stories, happy memories, friends and the most supportive husband and sons a wife and mother could ever have. She would have been embarrassingly proud of them all.



She went through 18 months of treatment – two operations, radiotherapy and chemotherapy. She bounced back from the first operation. She even managed a trip to Pembrokeshire with the Lettuce. They sat together on the beach, confronted the situation, and laughed, and cried. Caroline had gone to the toilet, and came back to find them all howling, and said “You can’t have missed me that much”, but when Gaye told her the prognosis,

she was instantly in tears too. However, they also played the Maltesers game back at the cottage, rolling the sweets down a retractable tape measure into their mouths. The three remaining Lettuce, Caroline, Wendy and Shirley, are determined to keep on doing these mad things together, because they know Gaye wouldn’t have wanted them to stop.

Following her diagnosis, Gaye and Nina, by now, of course, her sister-in-law as well as her friend, made the most of their time together and continued to have fun. On a particular shopping trip they filled trolleys with clothes and made a rule that if they tried a garment on, they had to show each other no matter how awful it looked. As usual, there was a lot of laughter.

Nina also remembers that, following her first surgery she was supplied with a wig which she hated. Before a family party they did their best to give it a more natural look. Gaye put the wig on as Nina tried to ruffle it up, but it flew off and landed on the (fortunately closed) toilet lid.

Robin and Gaye, Nina and Phil were also able to enjoy this time as a foursome and had several days out and lunches together. But after the second operation, she began to deteriorate more quickly.

The Lettuce visited her in hospital. As each Lettuce left they hugged Gaye, who whispered in their ear in turn. Afterwards, they realised she wanted to give a final message, part of her long goodbye, in her own style of love and understanding before, as she knew, the cancer would take her mental abilities. Caroline knew exactly what Gaye meant by: 'Don't let the buggers grind you down'. These messages meant so much – whatever Gaye was going through, she was still thinking about them.

The fact that she would never see her boys with wives and babies upset her dreadfully, but her jealousy of her friends who had that pleasure was never a sour emotion, it was a supportive one. And the Lettuce have promised, of course, to keep an eye on Ben and Sam as they grow older, knowing that she would have done the same for them. As Caroline said: "*Ben and Sam, your boys, were your world and you loved to talk about them and we loved to hear of their various exploits and we promised you we would watch out for them. This we intend to do for as long as they allow it. Robin was a complete blessing to you and your marriage to him was a good one, you had a new lust for life after getting together with him. Robin too will come under our watchful eye and we will be here for him at any time*".

The carers who came in to look after Gaye at home quickly picked up her love of fun and laughter, drenching her in vast quantities of Jo Malone perfume and playing practical jokes on Robin.

Nina remembers her last journey with Gaye in the ambulance going to the hospice, even then having a laugh: "*When I returned home from South Africa*

Gaye thought it would be rather nice if I were to go out with her brother Phil. during this journey we were able to reminisce about memorable times over the years of our friendship and I reminded her of her mission for me to become Mrs Bohane. She laughed and said "I'm sorry", to which I replied "Well Gaye 30 happy years later...I'll let you off!"

There have been many common themes in this tribute. Everyone said that she has been so lively, so ALIVE, that people could not believe she was gone. Frances remarked that when she had to tell people she had worked with that Gaye had died, they simply couldn't believe it – despite the prognosis, they all somehow believed that things wouldn't come good for her.

Another common theme has been fun, and laughter, be it at a leopard skin bra, a cat falling in a pond, or getting covered with ticks. Her sister in law, Jean, said "*I remember her face lighting up and the laughter wrinkles around her eyes when she laughed. I can hear her laugh when I think of her..... At my 60th birthday party, she was sitting in the lounge and I asked her if she would like a glass of champagne and she turned to me and laughing, she said, 'This is the life for me'. That's how I remember Gaye.*" And her other sister in law, Nina, said "*My overall memory of a lifetime of friendship with Gaye is of laughter, what more can anyone ask?*"



Jack's words eloquently sum up everyone's feelings: "*I'll remember Gaye as someone with a huge amount of energy, constantly pottering about the house and garden. She had an incredible taste for fine cooking and fine wine, and she definitely loved life. She was incredibly warm and caring, but most of all, I will remember how important she was to my Dad and my stepbrothers. There is a Gaye sized hole in our life now which won't be filled*"

In remembering Gaye those who knew her are recognising the gap she has left in their lives, and the vital roles she played in them. Gaye lived her life with humour and style. She was loving, reliable, funny, resourceful and skilful. To feel her loss is to recognise the size of her contribution, which is now sadly missing. But consider the legacy she left. She has demonstrated ways to live differently but better. One way to honour her death is to take up her good habits, adopt her skills and celebrate her contribution. “What would Gaye do now?” might be a useful thing to ask in the months ahead, and might help everyone to continue to tap into her warmth, her wisdom, her good sense and her impact on your lives.



As Caroline wrote of the Lettuces' gathering for Gaye:

*"We scattered some flower petals
and said our goodbye to Gaye
with these words adapted slightly
from Ruth Burgess:*

Gaye
Into the freedom of the wind and sunshine
We let you go
Into the dance of the stars and planets
We let you go
Into the winds breath and the
hands of the star maker
We let you go
We love you, we miss you, we
want you to be happy,
Go safely, go laughing, go
*dancing home..." ****

Gaye - So loved