

A celebration of life

Janet Dundas Williams

1 November 1938 – 18 October 2021

Wednesday 20 October 2021, Park Wood Crematorium



a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Janet was born in Northampton on 1st November 1938. She was the only child of James and Flora Dundas; her father was an agronomist in the colonial service and during World War Two he was posted to Africa, spending time in Cameroon and Nigeria. Flora accompanied her husband, so Janet went to boarding school from the age of 4 till 8. Once the war had finished she then joined her parents for several years in Nigeria, where Flora home-schooled her daughter. Janet was something of a tomboy, always independently minded, even at that young age, and she made the most of the adventures Nigeria afforded her.

At thirteen she came back to the UK, and back to boarding school, in Ashford in Kent. Here her history teacher was a big influence, nurturing Janet's longstanding passion for the subject. School also brought Janet lifelong friendships, like with Ann Maxwell-Lyons, or Maxi, as she was affectionately known and Catherine Fuller who now lives in Canada. Janet's father having left the colonial service and become a technical translator in Kent, Janet lived back with her parents at a house called Half Acre in Ryarsh, while she took her A Levels, then went on a secretarial course and did a placement in Austria for Voluntary Service Overseas.

She worked at Kings College London, before enrolling on a Sociology degree at St Aidan's College, Durham University. Janet moved up to Durham, finding rooms within the cathedral of that city, and pursued her studies with idealistic enthusiasm, as well as fitting in concerts and social evenings with her friend Holly, an American who was studying music.

Having gained her degree and completed work placements in Bristol, Janet got her first job with Family Service Units in Manchester, working with families with multiple problems and bringing her practical but compassionate approach to the aid of many. It was a tough role, but one Janet found hugely rewarding, as she did her work with Oxford Social Services Department as their training officer. Janet shared a flat in Oxford with Ruth, who Janet would often go and visit subsequently. Janet then returned to the FSU, this time as unit organiser in Whitechapel, east London. Wherever she worked, Janet became close to her colleagues, and counted them as friends. In Manchester she had shared a house with others on her team, but in London she bought her own flat.

In 1976, Janet found herself alone. A relationship had ended and her mother had died. She went to America to spend the bicentennial with Holly and her family and on her return she placed a Lonely Hearts advert in the New Statesman, 'looking for someone to spend [her] life with'. In that hot summer, the advert was read by a young gentleman by the name of Mike, who had just moved down to London as a management consultant. He took a chance and sent a reply, to box number 4611 (a number engrained on Mike's brain forever). He wasn't alone – Janet had around twenty replies to her advert – but Mike's response caught her eye, and she put a call through to his work phone. That conversation led to a first date, at an Italian restaurant in Pimlico, and an evening full of laughter and easy company. For their second date Mike managed to tempt Janet to a French restaurant, and it didn't take long for him to move into her flat in Bow, the two of them absolutely certain they had found their special person.

Mike wanted to say a few words today, about Janet:

The messages I have received have paid tribute to Janet's honesty, openness, loving nature and willingness to help people.

All that is true, but she was also brave. All the life-changing events that happened in our time together were instigated by her.

She suggested after we had been living together for about 18 months that we should get married.

She decided to leave a secure job and become a self-employed consultant, because she believed that she had experience and expertise that could help other organisations in the caring professions.

After we had successfully established Partnership at Work, she said that there was no longer any need for us to live in London, starting the process that led to the move to Holmfirth, and for my mother to move across from Liverpool.

Having become increasingly concerned about climate change and its consequences, she visited the people behind Marsden and Slaithwaite Transition Town, and set about gathering and enthusing a group of people, including Martin Smith, launched HoTT and as Chair established it as a major force in the Holme Valley.

Finally, the term “do-gooder” often carries overtones of contempt or dismissal. I’m proud to say that Janet was a “do-gooder” and much of the good she has done survives.

To return to their early years together, Janet and Mike shared many tastes, including in the realm of the arts, enjoying visits to concerts and galleries, and of course restaurants. Though Janet also greatly valued their home life together, perhaps especially because her early years had been so fractured. They quickly established each other’s strengths – put it this way, Janet only ever cooked for Mike once! Even when he was away on business, as he was frequently, he would leave her meals ready to go.

Janet repaid the favour by being a very willing designated driver; she really enjoyed getting behind the wheel, with Mike as navigator, especially on their many sojourns to France. Mike wanted to show her the south of the country, where he had studied, and in 1977 they headed for the Toulouse area on holiday, finding a lovely gite about an hour east of the city which they liked so much they returned to it for more than twenty years, moving to another nearby for another 12 years when the first became unavailable. Wherever Janet and Mike chose to spend their holidays, they preferred out of the way places, surrounded by nature, but they did also enjoy getting to know the local community over their repeated visits, in the Tarn and in Scotland, as well as on their more recent trips to Brittany.

As Mike phrased it, ‘it was decided’ that Janet and he would get married, and he agreed! So it was that, on 13th May 1978 (which was the first gap Camden Town Register Office had to offer, mainly because everyone else was more superstitious than these two) they tied the knot, witnessed by Maxi and Mike’s old friend Liz. They had moved to Camden Town for Janet’s work; she had been recruited by the new FSU director, Tim Cook, as one of three Assistant Directors with responsibility for a number of Units. Janet’s expertise in evaluation was also applied across all the Family Service Units, and she would often have to journey outside of London to visit those further afield, once crossing paths with Mike at Euston station on their respective travels. She was busy, but thrived on the sense of purpose and fulfilment that her work brought her, and was hugely respected within her field. Janet had a way of suggesting, rather than directing, that was far more effective than any sledgehammer approach would have been.

One of her good friends, Sara, spoke of Janet in her professional role. They first met in Oxford in 1973, through a common acquaintance with Olive Stevenson and a shared passion and optimism for the role of social work. Their collaboration began in earnest in the early 1990s, when Olive again drew them together at a gathering of people committed to improving interprofessional communication and collaboration in work with vulnerable children and their families. The question posed was, ‘What can we do about it?’

Sara wrote:

During the next two decades our professional collaboration flowed from that question. We both tried to ‘do something about it’ and occasionally we did that together. We did it in Leicester, where we helped with decisions about the Area Child Protection Committees, and we did it across England while evaluating the effectiveness of Mini Sure Start Programmes. We also did it through sustained participation in the Professional Development Group, again, convened and given life by Olive Stevenson.

And with that collaboration a rich friendship grew between us and our husbands. We travelled together, to Bruges, Avignon, Paris and Brittany, to Herefordshire and to Scotland. We gardened together, pulling weeds in Totties, planting colour and shape in Marlow. We walked together – the hills in Yorkshire, the river valley in Buckinghamshire. We visited exhibitions and listened to music together. We patted each other's cats, shared time, meals and memories.

Janet's gift was her deep loyalty, her integrity, her intense interest and sensitivity to others and what matters in the world. She laughed easily and questioned intelligently. A touch on a sleeve, the warmth of a smile; seemingly without effort, she was always present.

After around ten years as Assistant Director at FSU, Janet had earned herself a sabbatical, and chose to undertake a Master's degree; she spent her year away from the role conducting the research for her thesis on the Study of Occupational Stress in Caring Professions, Mike willingly assisting with the data analysis, which was never Janet's favourite task! And though the writing up of the thesis took Janet until just a week before the three year deadline, what with juggling it with all her other commitments, she was justifiably proud of the study she produced.

In 1988, Janet made the decision to become self-employed, providing evaluation of social work services, then setting up Partnership at Work with Mike. Between them they offered a business-like approach to social care, for national government, local authorities and charities, sometimes working with valued colleagues. She still retained her links with FSU, serving as a Council member for two terms and travelling to London for social evenings with her ex-colleagues at National Office.

For some couples, working and living together would put quite a strain on a relationship, but for Janet and Mike it only brought them closer. They were very careful, too, to close the door on work at the end of the day, and they made a promise to each other right at the start that they would always take their holidays. In fact, they would book them in advance every year: their visits to the gite in the Tarn, their autumn migration to Scotland to see Janet's relatives, finding a place near Callander which they loved, and for several years a trip to Cornwall, along with Mike's mother Sheila.

Sheila used to come down to London every Christmas too, bearing a turkey that she habitually won through her golf club! Janet always got on well with her mother-in-law. Once Partnership at Work was established, and it was clear that Janet and Mike would be working all over the country, there was no longer a pressing reason for them to stay in the south-east, so they looked for somewhere still with good transport links, but which put them that bit nearer to Sheila (Mike's grandmother by then having died) for when she might need extra support.

Staying with their friends Mike and Morag Evans in Otley, Janet and Mike scouted round Yorkshire. Mike suggested Holmfirth as a place they might like to settle and Janet drew up the list of houses for them to take a look at. So it was that, on a rainy day in late winter 1989, they walked in 77 Totties, and something just clicked. Janet was not one to be put off by hard work; she could immediately see the potential in the place, and was delighted to finally have the big garden she had always wanted. Someone else delighted by the garden was the third member of the Williams' household, Perdita the cat, who had wandered into their front garden in Camden Town as a kitten and made herself at home. Another cat, Perdita II, now reigns supreme. Sheila moved across to New Mill, and often enjoyed trips out with Janet and Mike, and meals together on a Saturday night.

Never one to sit idle, Janet also managed to find the time to research her family tree, extensively. She always felt an affinity with her Scottish heritage, and traced her roots through such diverse places as Kew Gardens, the BBC and Scottish archives, and with various people around the UK. Her efforts culminated in a fifty-page document on the Dundas family, and a gathering in 1996 attended by at least forty of her relatives.

After twenty years of consultancy work, celebrated with a big bash at Pepys House in London, Janet decided to think about retiring, embracing the chance to focus her energies on more local issues. I say local; what Janet actually set about doing was addressing her concerns regarding the climate crisis! She was instrumental, alongside Martin Smith, in establishing Holmfirth as a Transition Town, and was the driving force behind many of the initiatives that evolved from that, from the community wind turbine to the planting of hundreds of trees, from improving insulation and efficient heating for the vulnerable to lobbying local MPs. She was Chair of HoTT for eight years, and as fellow member Anne Baldwin put it, 'If Extinction Rebellion had come about a decade earlier, I get the feeling Janet would be there on the front line, fighting for social justice in a more sustainable future.' Janet's sense of purpose, determination and vision were an inspiration to many, and the plan is to create a memorial to her that she would have approved of, by planting rowan trees for her at Sands Recreation Ground. In Celtic folklore, the rowan tree signifies resilience and strong women. No tree could be more appropriate!

The last year or so brought many challenges, for Janet and for Mike, who looked after his dear wife steadfastly throughout. Sadly her ill health robbed Janet of some things, but she retained her love of music, and of gardening, which brought her a sense of peace. She spent many happy hours out there working alongside Sheree, who tended the garden at Totties for the last five years. Lockdown added to the challenges in some ways, but Mike said he was grateful that it meant he was there all the time to take care of Janet, and the two of them could enjoy regular walks in the countryside Janet loved so much. When Janet's needs surpassed the care Mike could give alone, she moved into White Rose House in Thongsbridge, and spent her final months settled and comfortable there.

Janet was an open, honest and loving woman, committed to her principles, who believed wholeheartedly in the concept of public service and lived by that every single day. She had an immense impact on so many people, and earned the respect and affection of all of you and many more in her 82 years.