

# If only I knew...



Sharyn Oxenbury's story about caring for her husband won the Palliative Care Australia National Photo and Story Competition in 2006. Sharyn also spoke about her experience at the launch of National Palliative Care Week that year. Her story now has a postscript - her experience living with grief. Here, she tells her story and talks about her life after the death of her husband.

## Gaz's Story: By his wife and best friend



Once in your lifetime you're lucky enough to find your soul mate. At 40 years young, I met Gaz, my lover, my best friend, and my husband. We were married two years later on August 6, 1997. We thought we had it made and would be fishing on the bay at Bermagui when we were 90. We had even bought a holiday house there for our retirement.

This is our story, a story of our journey through the hardest road I have ever had to take in my life. On Saturday 10 May 2003, my darling Gaz had what I thought was an epileptic seizure. I could not have been more wrong.

I stood by Gaz's bed in emergency and felt the blood drain from my body as the medical staff told us that Gaz had a brain tumour. I thought straight away, "It's okay darling. We can beat this!" However the worst news was still to come.

They then told us that the brain tumour was a secondary cancer and that Gaz also had a lung tumour. Terminal is the only word that I can remember. We sat there together in the hospital, stunned, shocked, devastated, crying and not believing this could be happening to us. We came home and cried for three days. I could not stop. I kept saying to Gaz that this must be a dream and when we wake up it will all be okay.

We decided that the first thing to do was to tell our parents. I will never forget the sadness in their eyes. Each one wanted to trade in their lives for him.

We decided that we were going to give this our best shot and we were going to make every day that Gaz had with us a happy one with not too many tears but lots of love and fun things to keep our spirits up. Let's not waste our precious days with negative thoughts we decided.

We went to the specialist in Melbourne – a 2 hour drive from Shepparton, with some hope that by removing the brain tumour, radiation on the lung, and some chemotherapy, that maybe my darling Gaz would get another five years.

The brain tumour was successfully removed and we were home within 4 days. The nursing staff could not believe his recovery. Gaz was so bright, always giving them cheek with those great big blue eyes and his smile. How could people not love him?

Then we were off to Melbourne again, this time to start what we thought was six weeks of intense radiation and chemotherapy. We had so many hopes for a little extra time together.

However, this was not to be. At the end of the first week of treatment, the feeling of blood draining from our bodies returned. We were told by the doctor, "Sorry Sir, you have more brain tumours and you may die in 5 weeks".

We were devastated and angry that our time was running out, and that there were so many things that we wanted to do. We had a new home to finish - Gaz had done most of the work before he got sick.

Gaz had eight doses of radiotherapy on his brain and lung before we were sent home. This is when we met our palliative care nurses from Shepparton. Sonia waltzed into our lives on September 5, three months after Gaz was first diagnosed. What a breath of fresh air she was! We sat and told her our life story and there our friendship started.

Then came Bunty. At first Gaz thought her name was Bunny. These two ladies played a big part in our lives and if I did not know how much my darling loved me, I might have thought he would have run away with these girls.

Gaz was a very proud man, always doing beautiful things for me. He would go over to the house while it was being built and do little jobs until he got too tired. He was always determined to finish some small job. We lived in a lovely little flat that Gaz built while we built our dream house on the farm. We had lots of cows - Gaz loved his 'girls' and loved to go for a walk amongst them and feed them from his tractor.



We moved into our new home on November 20. Gaz however, did not seem to be happy and I could not figure out why. Then the penny dropped. The new house was so big that he had felt he would lose touch with the closeness we had in our little flat.

I had given up work to look after Gaz with the help of the palliative care team as it was his one and only wish to die at home. This was a promise that I was determined to keep.

Gaz would sleep all night before we would wake and have breakfast in bed. Then I would tuck him back to sleep until lunchtime. It would then be time to get up, shower and put his favourite aftershave on for the girls who visited after lunch. We would be sitting down and Gaz would be waiting to hear the sound of Sonia or Bunty's car coming up the drive. What great support for me these girls were. Nothing was ever too much for them.

Our family room was our window to the world. You could see people coming and going, see our beautiful garden, and Gaz's cows down in the paddock.

Stereotactic surgery was one thing that Gaz had to have done to give Gaz precious time. They screw a helmet onto your head and you wait all day for them to plan and at the end of the day they blast your tumours with radiation. He said that it hurt like hell but never once did he complain to anyone.

Gaz always had a smile and plenty of cheek to show those lovely nurses. He had a way of getting into your heart - it always showed in the way people thought about him. One special Irish nurse went back to Ireland and sent us a postcard. Gaz was so thrilled to receive this, not expecting the nurse to remember him.

After his stereotactic surgery we decided to go on the ferry across the bay to Queenscliff. It was a lovely time. We spent two beautiful days away, slowly walking around. We even went to the pictures. He was really tired but there was no way he was going home early. I could write all day about my darling Gaz, as I have so many funny stories in my memory bank.

My brother and his wife moved out onto our farm to help me care for Gaz. Gaz loved a Bundy and coke and every night. Rain, hail or shine we would have happy hour with them. Gaz would have one can each night, nearly up until the day he died.



One month before Gaz died, he had a fall and hurt his hip which really slowed him down. He was sick of being at home and he was very frail by this time. Even so, he really wanted to go away somewhere. We decided to take him to Longwood where his family had originally come from. There is a road named after his family. We went and saw this and had a lovely day with our best friends.

Upon returning home, it was clear that all he wanted to do was get on his tractor. I was so frightened that he would hurt his hip but I helped him on and away he went down the paddock. That day was worth a million dollars to me and you should have seen his face!!

Sonia and Bunty and the new hospice staff member Jacinta helped me stay strong and not be afraid of Gaz dying. Nothing was too much trouble for these wonderful ladies who were always

there to help me through this difficult time in our lives. I knew the time was coming fast. My beautiful strong husband was deteriorating before my eyes.

I knew when I woke up on the morning of Sunday 31 October 2004 that this would be the day that Gaz would die. That day, Gaz would not let me out of his sight. There were so many members of our family and our closest friends around when Gaz died in my arms.

Bunty was on call that day. She asked me if I would like to bathe Gaz and dress him, so we did this together. We washed, shaved and dressed a man we both loved. Laying him on the bed in his best shirt and Levis, we then sprayed him with his favourite after shave. He looked so peaceful lying there with no more pain.



Gaz left our farm that evening as the sun was setting over the paddock and through the willows. What a fitting departure for such a fine gentleman.

My heart aches to see Gaz again. Our hospice nurses are still helping me greatly with my journey through life, without my husband. They are my friends now and will always be part of my life.

What can I say but Gaz's famous last words, "March on Shaz. I love you all."

### **Five years later**

It has been nearly 5 years since Gaz died. One thinks to themselves, "Will I ever get through the long and lonely hours by myself?"

After nursing a loved one with a terminal illness, you spend every minute of the day with them, then they are gone, leaving you to wonder if your life will ever have any meaning to it again.

I coped with my grief by being lucky enough to have two wonderful sons, and a great network of family and friends.

For me, personally, I have never been able to sit still and have always been on the go all the time at work and home, never saying no to anyone asking me to go here and there and everywhere. When you are go, go go, you don't have time to think how sad and lonely you are.

I went back to my job which I held for two years before Gaz got sick. I was not the same person who left.

I didn't want to be there, I was very angry that my life wasn't the same.

Over the time of Gaz's illness, I had built a very special friendship with our palliative care nurses, such a good rapport that they knew what I needed was something new in my life. I was asked to come and work in the Hospice Opportunity Shop and it was my salvation - working to help keep those wonderful girls on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in order to allow other people the same care we had received.

I have been there nearly 4 years and I have many volunteers who work for us, who mostly have all been touched by cancer in some way. We are a like a big family. It's lovely to be able to help families when they bring in their loved one's things - to be able to tell them that you know exactly how they feel and how hard it is.

It's very rewarding to help them and share our experience of losing our loved ones.

I am also very lucky. When you lose someone you love so much, you think that you will never have room in your heart to love again.

But I have been blessed to have found a very good man who not only loves me, but understands the great love and affection I had for my husband Gary, and that he will hold a special place in my heart forever. But Peter knows that I have room for him too! Thank you Peter for showing me that you can love again.

For all I have been through, I feel that it makes you a stronger and better person.

Sharyn Oxenbury