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# HEALING BROKEN HEARTS

They met, fell in love and thought they would spend the rest of their lives together ... until tragedy struck. A support group for young widows gives hope

Story FRANCES WHITING

**W**hen we marry (or choose to be with someone as a life partner), after all the months of planning the dress, the cake, the seating arrangements and hoping for good weather, it all comes down to one distilled moment in time. The vows. That moment when we promise each other that nothing, except death itself, will break our union.

We leave the ceremony in a shower of good wishes, and plan all the things we will do together: buy a house, travel, perhaps have a family of our own.

But what happens if "til death do us part" comes all too soon? What happens if the life you planned together is taken away from you before it really began?

Presently, there are more than 20,000 young widows in Australia under the age of 40, and Rebecca Adams is one of them. Adams, now 40, was 33 when she lost her husband Dan just six weeks after their 2013 wedding.

"You feel very alone because not only are you grieving, you just don't know anyone else in your age group in the same situation," Adams says.

In 2015, Adams, along with two other Brisbane women, Carren Stapleton and Lauren Leslie Carr, founded First Light, a not-for-profit organisation that links young widows across Australia, providing face-to-face and online support. On May 15 and 16, the organisation is hosting Australia's first Camp Widow (which originated and is based in the United States) at Brisbane's Stamford Plaza hotel.

"We have more than 140 widows attending, and we have presentations by guest speakers, round table discussions, and talks on practical topics like how to support your children," Adams says.

"We also have lots of laughs and lots of tears. After Dan died, I attended a Camp Widow in San Diego in 2014, and it changed everything for me. You look around the room and you see hundreds of other young widows who have their own story, and you begin to feel less alone."

Telling their story to Qweekend are five young widows who are attending the camp, and who hope, as widower Alex Bettles says, "someone who needs to, hears it."



**LAUREN LESLIE CARR, 56**  
Teacher, son Max, 18 months, widow of James Leslie, lives at bayside Brisbane

I never expected to become a widow at 26. I thought that James and I would have kids, grow old together and just be happy. I met him at a bar and I was pretty smitten straight away. He was the kind of person everyone wanted, loved and I just felt so proud he wanted to be with me.

We got married on January 9, 2010, on my parents' property beside a creek. It was a really hot day, but it was perfect and I'm so grateful we had that one, perfect day. James had long term depression, and it affected how he thought about himself. He was seeing a psychologist and a psychiatrist and he was on medication but it wasn't really working. He was so close to finishing his university degree in public health, and he was pretending to me and everyone else that he was still going to uni. He'd go off with his bags and books, but I found out after he died he was going to the movies. He would have these wild mood swings from very down and sitting on the floor with his head in his hands to being ecstatically happy. One night, he was very up and down, talking about really wanting to have children, then saying that he didn't think he could have children because he didn't want to pass on what

he had, his mental health issues. It was a very long, difficult night, and eventually he went out. I was exhausted, and fell asleep. I didn't realise he hadn't come home.

Two police officers came to my door the next morning. I knew the moment I saw them. Two early morning joggers had found James in a park. He had taken his life. He died on June 27, 2011, and he was 30 years old. That was almost 10 years ago, but I can remember James completely, I loved him very, very much.

The first few years were pretty awful, at one point I gave myself two years to get better, and if

I didn't I was going to be with James. The two best decisions I made were to go back to work as a teacher, because being with kids all day you don't get time to think. The next best thing I did was connecting with Rebecca Adams through a mutual friend, and becoming a part of First Light. It just changed everything, meeting other people like me. I had my son, my beautiful Max through IVF, and I could not have done that without the support of the other First Light widows. His middle name is James, and I think James would be happy to know that.

**CARREN STAPLETON, 49**  
Engagement manager, mother of Mikayla, 20, and Richard, 24, stepmother of Lachlan, 26, and Danielle, 28, widow of David Stevenson, lives in Springfield Lakes

It was a second marriage for both David and I. We had first met at the Queensland Police Service in Oxley where I was in recruit training and he was an officer. We didn't get together until years later after both our marriages had broken up. I just felt so lucky when I married him. He was the most wonderful person. We got married in September, 2009, he proposed at the top of the Empire State Building in New York, it was so exciting. I was 37, he was 42 and we both brought our own wonderful children into our marriage. In 2013 Dave was working as an Inspector in Metro South. On May 7 that year, he was on an early shift, I was asleep when he left, and then I



**HOPE:** First Light founding directors, left to right, Carren Stapleton, Lauren Leslie Carr, and Rebecca Adams. Above left, Lauren Leslie Carr marrying husband James; above, Carren Stapleton and her husband David on their wedding day. **Main Picture:** Richard Walker

FEATURE

went to work too and just had a really busy day. We used to check in with each other during the day, particularly because of Dave's job but I hadn't heard from him. Then I got a phone call from Dave's boss, telling me Dave had passed out at work. His boss asked me to meet him at the QE2 hospital. I flew out the door and as I was driving, I got a call from a nurse telling me not to go to the car park, but straight to emergency and the police would meet me there. And I just knew at that moment. When I got there they told me that David had pulled over in his police car and passed out earlier. Then he had rung the office, and his boss told him to wait, and he would collect him but David said no, he would drive himself, that he was okay. When he got there, his boss took him straight to hospital, and they actually walked in together. While his boss talked to the charge nurse, David had a massive heart attack there and then, and lost consciousness. I was told they kept working on him because they knew I was on my way, but he never regained consciousness.

I remember being asked who they should call and I said his mum, and after that I don't really remember much at all. No one got to say good-bye to him, it was all so quick. After that, I felt like I was walking around in someone else's life; I was functioning, I was getting the kids to school, but for years afterwards, years, I did not know who I was. When you lose your person, you lose yourself as well. I think I googled "young widows" just in desperation, and that's how I started going to First Light.

I think it saved me. I'm still not there yet in terms of finding my future, but I now believe I have a good one, and that's huge in itself.

**JO SMITH-HOOKER, 45**

Full-time volunteer, Operations First Light, mother of Bailey, 16, and Jordan 18, widow of Daniel Smith-Hooker, partner of Daniel Kell, lives in Kedron, Brisbane

I met Daniel when I'd just left school. He was just an amazing guy. We got married March 20, 1999, and moved to Rockhampton. Daniel was a boilermaker, and we had Jordan in 2002, followed by Bailey in 2005. In January 2012, Daniel found a lump in his groin which turned out to be stage 4 lymphoma, and a bone marrow biopsy later showed he had masses all around his body, so there was some pretty aggressive chemotherapy, and he did go into remission eventually. When we got to about 17 months' remission, I felt like I could finally exhale, that Daniel really was going to be all right. Then on September 5, 2013, the girls and I were going into town for Jordan's dance lesson and, when we left, Daniel was hosing the garden and he aimed the hose at us through the windows of the car. It's funny what you remember, the girls just loved it. When we got home later, I realised Daniel's motorbike was missing. It was getting dark and I thought I would give him until eight o'clock, and then do something, and then the police knocked at my



**REBECCA ADAMS, 40**

Communications adviser, widow of Daniel Collins, now married to Nick Adams, with children, Archie, 3, Theo, one, lives in Newmarket, Brisbane

Daniel and I met online, and on his profile he said he liked watching documentaries, and then he listed "Jersey Shore" as one of them, which made me laugh. And he kept making me laugh after that. I was 31, he was 32, and in sales in the IT industry. He was a big kid really. He loved going to theme parks, loved a road trip, he loved going to the markets with me – if you find a man who is happy to walk around the markets with you for hours, you don't let him go! He was a really kind person who made everyone feel important, especially me. I went to his house for dinner one night, and he was very nervous, fussing around in the kitchen. He said he had a present for me, and he gave me a photo book filled with all these pictures of us. On the last page was a picture of a ring, and then he proposed. We got married on June 9, 2013, but unfortunately we had only been married for six weeks before he passed away. Daniel was diagnosed with depression two weeks after the wedding, and then four weeks after that, he took his own life very unexpectedly. I went from being a newlywed to a 33-year-old widow, who had lost her husband to suicide, which comes with a whole other world of emotions. After he died, I had four weeks off work, then returned part time. My manager and co-workers were brilliant, so was my family, but I was so very lost. No one my age was able to understand, no matter how hard they tried. I heard about Camp Widow in the United States, I went, and it changed everything. I wanted to do something similar here, so I started First Light. I have gone on to repartner and have children, and that's not something I thought would ever happen until I attended my first Camp Widow, and I saw other people who had done that. That gave me hope, and the whole idea of First Light is just that, to give hope in the darkness.

**ALEX BETTES, 56**

Manager, wholesale sales, widower of Emily Cavanagh, lives in Ascot Vale, Melbourne

There's not one word to describe Emily. She was a gorgeous person, and I was batting way above

door. Daniel had died in a motorbike accident. I remember the female police officer picking me up, I must have made a noise because the girls came out of their rooms, and that's always weighed on me. They were eight and 11 at the time. Most of the next year was just a fog. I had been with Daniel since I was 17, I was now 36 and had no clue who I was without him. I was scared all the time that I was going to not be a good mum for his girls and in 2016 I hit rock bottom. I had this moment of, "Is this it? Is this how you are going to live your life, just treading water?" I started seeing a psychologist who asked if I knew any other young widows, and that's how I found First Light. In early 2017, First Light decided to put a team together for a half marathon. Daniel and I had run the Gold Coast half marathon together the year he passed away. I decided I would run it for Daniel. That's when things really started to get better, the training was good for my mental health, and I began to believe I could have a life. Not the life I had with Daniel, but another one. In 2017, I met my partner Daniel Kell who is a wonderful man and we have now moved in together. Life is good, and I hope my story might help someone else believe that their life can be too.

**ANOTHER LIFE:** Jo Smith-Hooker, and, top left, marrying Daniel in 1999; Rebecca Adams and her husband Daniel on their wedding day in 2013, six weeks before he passed away. **Main picture:** Nigel Hallett

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my average. I met her on RSVP in December 2013, and we would have been one of those on-line dating success stories you hear about had Emily got the fairytale ending she deserved. We got married on October 15, 2016, and I couldn't believe my luck. One Sunday night at the end of September in 2018, she got pretty crook with what we thought was gastro, but it didn't go away. We went to the hospital where a scan showed a tumour in her bowel. She had surgery immediately where they took 30cm of her bowel, and we thought it was successful, but no. The tumour had gone through the bowel wall into her lymph nodes, and it turned out Emily had stage 4 bowel cancer, so we started on some pretty intense chemo. It just got really brutal for Em from then on. She got sicker and sicker and it turned out there was a mutation within the cancer itself. It needed a different treatment, an oral one, and it was not on the PBS. She needed a three-month cycle and it was \$48,000 a month. I was prepared to mortgage the house, use the superannuation, I would have done any-

thing, but our friends and family rallied and raised it. I wanted a miracle for her, but she didn't get it. She just declined, she had deep vein thrombosis in her arms and neck, and then her vertebrae fractured, just from the wear and tear on her body. Then the cancer spread into the lymph nodes on her neck, and she just was so brave through it all. She passed away on September 21, 2019. She was 38. The last few days we hired an agency nurse to look after Emily solely, because Em could see how stressed her regular nurses were and she wanted to give them a break. That was my wife. After she died, I completely lost my way. I couldn't bear to take her things off her bedside table for a very long time. Luckily I've got great friends and family who could see I was in a bad way, so they encouraged me to get help, and that's how I found First Light. I was 34, a widow, my mates are all buying houses or moving overseas, and I'm just stuck. So meeting other people in the First Light forum, I can't tell you the relief. It's helped me to understand that I will love Emily always, but that I can move on and it doesn't take away a single moment I had with her. I can just be grateful for the moments we had. ■

**Camp widow Australia, May 15-16, Stamford Plaza  
 Brisbane, [firstlight.org.au](http://firstlight.org.au)  
 For help call Lifeline 13 11 14**



**GRATEFUL:** Alex Bettes, and with Emily on their wedding day. **Picture:** Tim Carrafa

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