

Heartbreaking struggle to face harsh new reality

LIFE GOES ON AFTER LOSING LOVE



Caroline Winter found new love with Drew Radford (left) after her first husband Richard (above) died.
Picture: Russell Millard Photography



Rebecca Whitfield-Baker

Less than five years after Caroline Winter married her person in an idyllic New Year wedding, the 37-year-old was facing the unimaginable – preparing for his funeral.

The Adelaide journalist and podcaster learned her “cheeky and hilarious” car enthusiast husband Richard had died of a heart attack when she went to meet him at a car rally, where he was taking part as a navigator.

She’ll never forget the moment she received the tragic news, nor the cruel irony of being stopped by police to hear it on the aptly named Worlds End Highway at Robertstown.

“It’s like in the movies, where your whole world

changes in an instant ... I just crumpled down the side of the car and into shock; that was the turning point where literally my life completely changed in that moment,” she says.

“Shock sets in and you’re in a daze, you just can’t grasp the fact that this person is never walking through the door again ... the fact he left one day and just never came home was for me mind-blowing.”

“His briefcase was sitting next to the console at the front door, all his trinkets were on the table next to my bed.

“I walked around the house for days and weeks just talking to him, saying, ‘What do you mean you’re gone?’”

Even after the funeral, Winter struggled with her new reality of life without her 53-year-old “soulmate”, who’d she met in a “cute kind of office romance” while

working in regional radio in NSW, later juggling a long-distance relationship when each got promotions in different cities before settling in South Australia, his home state.

“I remember in those early days going to speak to my counsellor and just thinking, ‘Oh, she’s going to tell me how I can get him back, she is going to solve this for me – this isn’t permanent,’” Winter says.

“That cycle of grief was a really interesting journey ... coming to terms with and accepting the fact this actually was real was probably the most confronting part.”

For her, simple routines became key.

“The thing that helped me through those early days was just taking some control back ... so, little things, like I’d get up every morning, it didn’t

matter how I felt, and I would make my bed – even if I later climbed back into it – it helped me, in a ritualistic way, to start the day,” Winter says.

“I’d do things that Richard would have been doing that I didn’t have any interest in, like looking after the garden, or washing the cars – all the things that kept me close to him.

“I kept a journal which, for me, was the place where I could not only talk openly, but could talk to Richard.”

Winter says while she was wrapped in an incredible village of support – including her late husband’s family, who she remains close to – being left widowed in her thirties was lonely.

“What I knew to be true was that, at 37, there was really no

one else in my friendship circle – or anyone I knew – who had gone through this,” she says. While she and Richard weren’t sure they wanted children, she felt their absence when he died.

“When you’re widowed, with children, you’ve obviously a whole other set of complexities (in supporting them), but you’re still a family unit and have a daily reminder of ‘your person’ ... when Richard died, that was it, it was like the end of our story.

“I like to think of my life as ‘BR’ and ‘AR’, so ‘Before Richard’ and ‘After Richard’, because that day on July 27, 2013, was like a really defining line in the sand for me.”

Twelve years on, Winter has remarried – to ABC presenter Drew Radford – but continues to use her first husband’s surname for work.

“I think about it a lot, I think how lucky I am to still be able to have his name ... I’m definitely still a Winter and I’m very proud to beso,” she says.

Winter says finding new love after the loss of a life partner is complex and confusing.

“Firstly, there is no right or wrong time ... to repartner – or not,” she says.

“One of the things I struggled most with, when I

TELE02201MA - V1

without your soulmate but ...

'Unspoken stories of grief, love, and life as a widow'



Rebecca Adams was left a widow six weeks after her marriage when her new husband, Dan, died by suicide.

Lauren Leslie Carr lost her husband James to suicide when he was 30. She later chose to use IVF to become a mum to Max.



Rebecca Whitfield-Baker

It's estimated there are about 55,000 widows in Australia aged under 55 – with 18,000 of these 45 or younger.

Yet, it's a rarely talked about topic and those who find themselves in the heart-rending scenario report feeling confused, isolated and alone as their future is suddenly shattered.

Journalist and podcaster Caroline Winter, who was widowed at 37, is collaborating with national charity First Light Widowed Support to produce a new podcast series, *Widow Diaries*.

The program aims to share the "often unspoken stories of grief, love, and life after loss as a young widow", allowing those who've experienced it to "feel seen and heard".

"When you are in your 20s, 30s, 40s... and 50s, you are meant to be enjoying life – planning and doing all the things that lead you to later in life, not thinking about losing your person," Winters said.

Twelve years ago First Light co-founder Rebecca Adams lost her first husband, Dan, to suicide just six weeks after the couple married.

She said there were no young widow-specific support networks in Australia at the time and she travelled to the US to attend a camp-style gathering there for widowed men and women.

"It was such a shock, we'd gone from being engaged, to being newlyweds, to then very quickly being a widow at 33 ... the shock around that was incredible for me, his death was a real contrast to that," she said.

"We were talking about starting a family ... it wasn't just the grief of losing him but all our life plans – there are so many different parts of the pain and different layers to grief

when you're widowed at a young age."

Three years after losing Dan she did find new love and the couple now have two sons.

"(My new husband, Nick) was very understanding that I would never stop loving Dan and wasn't threatened by that ... he understood that the heart has an infinite capacity to love," she said.

"Letting someone new in" is just one of the topics covered in the podcasts.

Others include "navigating identity as a widow", "mothering through trauma" and "blending families after loss".

Among those to share their story is teacher, librarian and writer Megan Daley who at 40 lost her husband, Dan, to a heart attack, leaving her a single parent to two girls aged nine and five.

"The incredible intensity of solo parenting hit me like a sledgehammer ... I've often heard grief described as like a dark heavy blanket over you and I felt like I had this blanket around me, which was my children – everybody else's grief," she said.

Teacher Lauren Leslie Carr hadn't a chance to become a mum when she was widowed at 26 after her husband James died by suicide just a year into their marriage.

She later chose to use IVF to welcome son James into the world.

"There is no dress rehearsal for this, I know my family did their best but I don't think they really understood just how big an impact it would have on me, or how long the grieving process would take," she said.

"I understand now that I live with grief, it's not something that will come to an end for me, it is something I live with."

Shearer-turned trainer and mindset coach Josh Clayton lost his adored wife Haley, who he describes as a "larger than life character with this amazing vibe" to motor neurone disease (MND) when he was 33 – she was 34.

"You just got caught up in her moment (when) you were talking to her ... it felt like you sort of left the world behind, well that's how I felt anyway," he said.

Sadly, the couple's little girl, Stella, was just two at the time, with her dad describing the heartache of watching the loving mother no longer be able to wrap her arms around her daughter.

I walked around the house for days and weeks just talking to him

Caroline Winter

realised that Drew was more than just a guy I might date, was (trying to) reconcile how I could have two soulmates; if Richard was my soulmate, how could this guy be my soulmate, too?

"If I loved Richard with all my heart and he was my person, how could I just suddenly make room for another person?"

Today, Winter feels blessed to have "two incredible loves in my life".

"They align in many ways but they also are different which is important, finding another Richard would have been impossible," she says.

"Drew is also that person who isn't jealous of someone who is no longer here, isn't jealous of the love that I had – and have – for Richard ... finding the right person who allows you to do that is really important."



Megan Daley was widowed at 40 when her husband Dan died of a heart attack, also aged 40. They are pictured here with their young daughters.

V3 - TELE02208 MA