

# Julie and Garry's Story

Farleigh Hospice cared for Garry's wife Julie at the end of her life. He explains how bereavement counselling and volunteering has helped him to cope with his grief so he can feel more optimistic about the future.



"Julie and I first met in 2011 when I was 53 and she was 57. We had a lot in common: I'm a father to three daughters and she had three children too, two daughters and a son. We both loved travelling - visiting Italy and Crete together - and we enjoyed going to the theatre and the opera.

I retired in April 2019 and we got married that September, spending our honeymoon on a cruise in the Canary Islands.

In January 2020, Julie noticed blood in her urine. She went to Broomfield Hospital for tests which confirmed that she had cancer. The tumour was quickly removed and her consultant seemed pleased with how it went. We clung to the thought that 'hope is coming'.

We went back in August to be told that, although the procedure in itself was successful, the cancer had become metastatic and had spread. She underwent an intensive course of chemotherapy for a year and, again, we hoped for a positive outcome.



When it became clear that this treatment would no longer work, my wife chose to come off of the chemotherapy and live her last months at home, so the consultant put us in contact with Farleigh Hospice. Two of my former work colleagues had been supported by Farleigh so I knew something about the care it provides but I didn't really know what to expect. Initially, Julie's quality of life improved when the chemotherapy therapy stopped. Farleigh supported us with weekly phone calls and practical support, including help to get a blue badge so we could use disabled parking.

I was still clinging to the hope that somehow Julie would get better but, after a good Christmas together, her health started to deteriorate. We received wonderful support from the Farleigh palliative care team. They visited us once or twice a week to care for Julie at home, making sure she was comfortable and had the correct medication. She enjoyed their company and I had someone that I could talk to. I could also telephone Farleigh for advice and support. Julie passed away in February 2022. She was able to die at home with dignity, as was her express wish, thanks to the support we received from Farleigh.

Naturally, I felt a huge sense of grief and was left searching for answers and reasons - why had this happened to me? I felt guilt, anger, shame and a loss of self-confidence



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and the word 'hope' suddenly seemed empty – I despised it. Looking back, I can see that I was at serious risk of depression.

Clearly, I was not coping well so, when Farleigh phoned me one day to offer me bereavement counselling, I was only too pleased to accept. I think men are generally reluctant to seek advice and support so problems and worries get bottled up which makes things worse, so this was a crucial decision and a turning point in my life.

I had eight weekly one-to-one counselling sessions from the Farleigh Circle adult bereavement service between June and August 2022.

From the very first session, the bereavement counselling started to help me. It allowed me to explore my pain and talk through my questions about death.

I think very highly of my Farleigh bereavement counsellor. Under her careful guidance, I felt empowered and permitted to express my feelings for the first time – which brought me a sense of relief straight away.

Conversations were sometimes difficult but the trust I established with my counsellor enabled me to start to make sense of death, which does not discriminate between

good and bad. I came to realise that searching for answers was very counterproductive and actually prevented me from starting the grieving process.

As my anxiety and other negative, corrosive emotions started to lift, I was in a much better place. The counselling helped me to start living in the present day, so I no longer concerned myself with asking questions about the future. I realised that time is short so it is important to make the most of the life we have left.

In the autumn, I began group bereavement therapy with other people in a similar situation to me. After three sessions, I felt ready to move on and start rebuilding my life.

Living alone is a life skill in itself, but I've had great support from my brother and sister-in-law, my daughters and step-children and I enjoy spending time with my three granddaughters.

I now volunteer for two days each week with the Gardening Club at Farleigh's hospice building in Chelmsford. I work with the maintenance team doing mowing, weeding and helping with projects like clearing the pond. It's my way of giving something back to Farleigh to say thank you for the excellent care and support that Julie and I have received.

I was apprehensive when I first started as I'd never done gardening before, but now I find it calming and distracting. Being part of a team and feeling the warmth of company and sense of community – it's like a second family. I get enjoyment from working hard, and seeing the patients enjoying the gardens has been of huge benefit to me. It's really uplifting and feels like a natural extension to the counselling.

I've also joined an art class and started to paint. I'm doing a 14-week course and really enjoying this new challenge.

It was Julie's wish that I move forward with my life after her passing and I am creating a life for myself that is bringing contentment – not always happiness. The sense of loss and grief will never leave me but it diminishes over time. I still have bad days but I am much stronger mentally and I have definitely returned to the stream of life.

**I will always be very grateful to Farleigh Hospice for the care that Julie received and the support given to me when she died. I am indebted to my counsellor and Farleigh's Circle adult bereavement service for helping me to move forward and I now feel more optimistic about my future."**

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