

# Balloons

Supporting bereaved children and young people in Exeter, East and Mid Devon



## 20 years of making a difference Mike, Charlie, and Chloe's story...



*'I remember saying "I'll see you Dad", as the last thing I said to him....'*

I know firsthand the need for support for those who are bereaved and the difference it can make - for the everyday person you don't think this is going to happen to you.

When I was 17 my dad died suddenly. I remember saying 'I'll see you Dad' as the last thing I said to him. My Mum did her amazing best for my brother, sister and I, but there was nothing really, no support, we just had to 'crack on'.

Then the same thing happened to my children. My wife died when our girls, Charlie and Chloe were young, it was about this time that Balloons was just setting up, we tentatively attended an event where we met other families in similar situations, it was amazing and really helped us all. 20 years on we still have some of the things the girls made with Balloons.

I have been involved with this fantastic charity ever since – I wanted to give something back and help as I could see the benefit of the support.

I have seen it grow and develop and keep doing what it can to help children and be something positive in such a dark and difficult time for so many. It's amazing to see it turn 20 and I am proud to be part of it.



We were only eight and nine when our mum died. She had been ill on and off for four years, so we don't really remember her before she became poorly - most of our memories are from the time she was unwell. We knew she was dying, and Mum and Dad were always open when talking with us about it. That was our "normal." We can still picture her wigs and her postchemo hair.

Mum was so crafty and creative. She was always making things with us - painting plates, doing art projects, and coming up with fun activities for sleepovers and parties. She worked at our school, too, and was well known there for her craft sessions. When she died, it was comforting that the people at school also knew her.

*"It's okay to be sad - grief does change with time..."*

Charlie and Chloe

When we returned after a few days away, some friends said things like, "I can't believe you got a whole week off!" - as if it were something lucky. Obviously, we'd have chosen being at school a thousand times over losing our mum.

We were lucky to have good support from our Dad and from school and local organisations. We went on a weekend with Balloons. We felt a bit nervous arriving, but it was reassuring to meet other families who understood what we were going through. Unlike at school, we didn't feel like the odd ones out. The adults had their own groups, and the children had theirs. We talked, did creative activities, and felt understood. I still have the salt jar I made that weekend - it lives in my memory box. For our dad, it meant so much to be around others who were living through something similar, and to realise he wasn't alone.

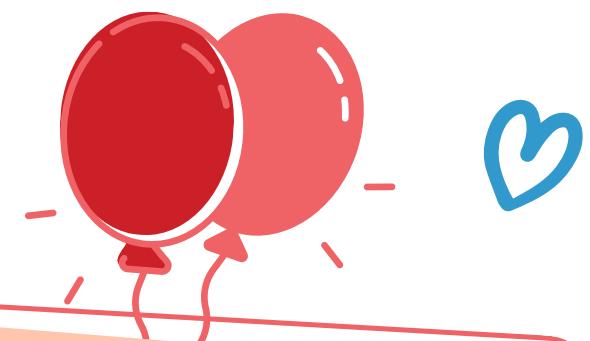
Dad used to say, "It's not good to be sad alone. We need to talk as a family. If you feel sad, put that feeling in a box, put the box in a drawer, and take it out when we're together or with someone you trust."

Mum had written us cards for after she died - birthday cards, good luck messages for our driving tests. They were incredible gifts, though it was hard when we reached the last ones.

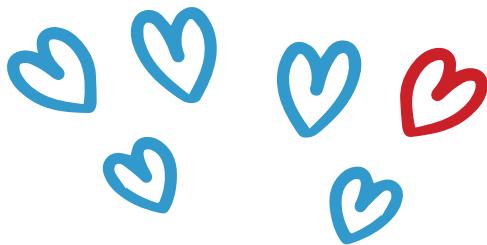
We're extremely close to our dad - we all talk every day. As we've grown older, grief has changed and resurfaced at different moments, like becoming a parent. More and more, our lives include people who never knew Mum, but what matters is surrounding yourself with the kind of people who understand that, no matter how much time has passed, she was our mum. Having photos up and talking about her is still so important.

## What we'd say to a bereaved child...

“Embrace your feelings. You can't change what's happened, and it's okay to be sad. Grief does change with time.”



“Try to be open—don't bottle things up. It's okay to talk about it, and as you get older you will learn to manage it. And if people offer help, take it. Having support and people who understand really matters.”



Please remember that we are here for you or someone you know who needs support.

Get in touch on [support@balloonscharity.co.uk](mailto:support@balloonscharity.co.uk)

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Chloe, Mike, and Charlie