

Dianne: a Personal Reflection



Dianne loved life. She loved everything about it: its variety and excitement, its risks and its rewards. She threw herself at it and into it, grabbed it with both hands and wrung every last precious drop from it.

She had an insatiable interest in all that life had to offer, delighting in learning new skills and developing new knowledge. She loved walking in Scotland and abroad, and in her younger days was a keen Munro-bagger. She was fascinated by Scottish history and the Scots language, often bemoaning that she had not been taught the former at school - other than "stories", and had been actively discouraged from using the latter.

In her 30s, she developed an abiding interest in gardening, natural history and bird-watching, which, because of her poor eyesight, became known as "bird-peering". She became adept at knowing the point at which she should pretend to see the little brown bird which everyone but her could see, but despite these difficulties, was able to identify a wide range of birds by their calls and by their *GIS* - general impression and size.

Throughout her adult life she was a keen attender of evening classes, freely admitting that she liked to "try before she would buy", although that did not seem to be a concept familiar to either the local authority or Edinburgh University, which sometimes led to misunderstandings and demands for payment - always ignored. When she retired, the University of the Third Age provided the ideal route into an apparently unlimited cornucopia of learning, which she threw herself into with her customary zeal.

She enjoyed the Arts, especially the theatre, cinema, classical music and opera, and in the operas of Wagner she found, for her, the perfect melding of drama, mystery and a Very Big Sound. Such was Dianne's enthusiasm for Wagner that last year she negotiated a "pass" from the hospital in which she was an in-patient, to attend a 5 and a half hour concert performance of "Die Walkure" at the Usher Hall - seated on the wooden seats up in the gods. She was exhausted by the end, but loved every minute of it! She was an enthusiastic supporter of the Edinburgh Festival and of the St Magnus Festival in Orkney, delighting in the

range of great artists and performers who came to her city every year, and loving the contrasting intimacy of the Orcadian festival experience as well as the extraordinary history of the islands.

Dianne had a great knack for fun, and a wicked sense of humour. She could be relied upon to find the humour in pretty much anything, including her final illness. Her habitual wry humour enabled her to puncture pomposity whenever she encountered it, in herself as well as others, and is something which so many friends have spoken about since her death.

Dianne had a strong social conscience and a commitment to social justice, spending most of her working life in social work. She spent many years working as an administrator and financial manager in Midlothian and Edinburgh, before becoming a senior manager in the old Borders Regional Council. She was made redundant at local government reorganisation in 1995, which was a dreadful shock, but, typically, she picked herself up and retrained to become a qualified practitioner. She had a rather unusual skill set for a social worker, having a comprehensive knowledge of the arcane workings of social work's back-office functions and of the systems the staff were responsible for administering; in her previous roles she had developed many of these systems and had written the policies and procedures.

Whatever her role in her working life and in her retirement, Dianne approached any task with total commitment and a determination to do the best she could for her clients, the Department or organisation. "Good enough" was never good enough for Dianne. She had to give of her best, and she expected others to do the same. Woe betide any unthinking official in the DSS or in Social Work HQ who tried to block Dianne's efforts to secure financial resources for a client. She was unrelenting and articulate; she knew their systems inside out and she was rarely bested by officialdom. To overhear any such phone conversation was a thing of wonder and at times could leave the listener feeling slightly sorry for the person at the other end of the phone line.

When Dianne retired in 2014, it soon became clear that a workaholic doesn't cease to be so just because they stop paid employment.

Dianne threw herself into community activity. She continued to volunteer for the Alzheimers Society telephone helpline, putting in 2 shifts a month for much of her retirement. She joined the U3A in Edinburgh, becoming, within weeks, its Treasurer, and an enthusiastic committee member. As Treasurer, she put her financial and negotiating skills to excellent effect, swelling the coffers of the organisation by thousands of pounds claimed from their bankers in compensation for the latter's repeated inefficiencies.

She became a keen member of the Friends of Braidburn Valley Park - her local park, where she had walked a succession of dogs over 30 years. She took on the role of Membership Secretary and became a key force driving forward numerous initiatives, including the famous Dog Show at 2 recent "Tea in the Park" events. The first of these was described by one observer as being "of biblical proportions", involving, as it did, over 100 dogs of all shapes and sizes, and at least 300 people in the audience!

She was also instrumental in progressing the landscaping and planting project at the North entrance to the Park, securing significant funding from Tesco for the project, which is now to be known, very fittingly, as “Dianne’s Garden”. And just last week, on checking her emails, I learnt the Dianne had been successful in a funding bid to the Big Lottery, as a result of which the Friends have been awarded £10,000 for an Outdoor Gym. So, still delivering for the organisations she supported! She would like that.

Dianne also became a founder member of the recently-formed Friends of Morningside Cemetery, driving forward their agenda with her customary enthusiasm and commitment, despite her deteriorating health. She was so pleased to secure a plot in the cemetery and liked the idea of being a part of the continuing improvement and care of the area.

Dianne dealt with her illness with the same attitude that she did everything else in her life. She refused to let cancer get the better of her. She called it by its name, she acknowledged it, and she got on with living her life to the best of her ability for as long as she possibly could. Other people called her “brave” but I don’t think Dianne saw it like that: she had carved out a life for herself, which made sense to her, and as far as she was concerned, she was just “getting on with it”. But even in the final weeks of her life, Dianne remained indisputably “Dianne-like”. Dianne was never one to be in awe of authority - and certainly not medical authority - and I will treasure her encounter with the surgeon who operated on her 3 weeks before her death. He was an older chap - probably a few years younger than us, but not wearing too well. He had to leave the bedside briefly to take a phone call and she said to me “He looks awfully old. Do you think he’ll be alright?” I attempted to reassure her but when he had returned and finished his spiel, she looked him up and down and said, “Well, I suppose you know how to do it”. The unspoken words “By now” hung in the air, and then she added “Unless you’ve forgotten of course”! He blinked and looked surprised, and whilst it was not quite “collapse of stout party”, I rather think Dianne won that encounter.

Dianne was the most alive person I ever knew. She lived life to the full, and was herself full of energy, fun and courage. Each day with Dianne was unpredictable and eventful, sometimes challenging and tempestuous, but always full of colour, fun and laughter. Reading cards and emails from people who knew Dianne, I am realising all over again, what a remarkable woman she was and how lucky I am to have been able to share her life for so many years.