



In tune: Angela and members of the With One Voice choir

Adrift after the loss of her great love, Angela Quigley re-discovered joy and a new community

TO RAISE YOUR VOICE AND LIFT YOUR HEART

BY HAZEL FLYNN

LIFE IS FULL OF CHANGES, some planned, some thrust upon us. In 2006 Angela and Alan Quigley made a big change, moving to north Queensland where they planned to enjoy the warm weather for seven years, then retire and take a big overseas trip together. But fate had something else in store.

Just four years after the move Alan, a commercial building site supervisor, was on an operating table undergoing a triple heart bypass. He came through it well but their difficulties had only begun. He was still recovering when Angela learned she had lymphoma. On the day of her final chemotherapy

session, her beloved 63-year-old husband was diagnosed with untreatable cancer. Alan died in February 2013, shortly after their 39th wedding anniversary. It was a terrible blow.

Angela had stopped work as a radiographer/mammographer during her own recovery and then worked part-time while Alan was ill. She was still two years off her planned retirement age of 65 when he died but she decided to leave her job early: "Alan worked and worked and worked and never got to enjoy his retirement. Maybe the same thing would happen with me, who knows?"

*Inspiring
creativity through
singing*



When it had become clear to them that Alan was not going to recover, Angela wanted to abandon their travel plans. But he gently insisted that after he was gone she should visit the places they had long dreamed of and enjoy them on his behalf. Preparation and the trip itself swallowed up several months, and Angela was barely home before she left again to help out when her elderly mother broke a wrist. More travel followed, to be with her grown son and daughter for their father's birthday, and then for the first anniversary of his death.

All this occupied the first year of her widowhood. When she was finally home to stay, "I found I was adrift with nothing to do. The reality started to set in: Alan is not here and he's not

going to be coming back. That's when I thought, I really need to do something to fill my days up." She read about the Solace Association for widows and widowers and went along. It helped. Then she heard about Probus for retired and semi-retired people and she joined that too. But still she was looking for something more.

She found it in a magazine piece about the local branch of the community choir movement "With One Voice", in which professional conductors welcome all comers, no experience necessary.

Angela had always loved music but didn't classify herself as a singer. Her only previous experience had been in her school choir and a few decades later in the parents' choir when her children were at school. But she was intrigued enough to go along. "The article featured a young woman who said she loved it so much she wouldn't miss it for anything. And when I walked in everyone was so welcoming. They made me and all the other newcomers feel right at home." She hasn't looked back.

To those who think they could never join a choir because they "can't sing," Angela says, "Just give it a go. I love singing but I couldn't sing solo, I don't have the voice. But," she laughs, "when I sing in the choir I'm drowned out by the other people. Once you sing with a choir it's amazing how you find a part in every song that suits you. We sing Japanese folk songs or African folk

songs and even if you think you can't sing you follow the simple, happy tune and forget yourself and the next thing you know you're singing along."

The Wednesday evening meetings, which wrap up with supper and a friendly chat, have become a treasured part of her week. "Everyone is there to have a good time. You really couldn't leave there feeling sad. You might have a problem when you go in but you come out feeling better about it. I drive home feeling energised."

Her diary is very full. As well as Probus and Solace meetings Angela does tai-chi and line-dancing. "I won't deny I'm still finding my feet. There are days when I still have that loneliness, but the good thing is my time is filled. I'm not wondering what I'm waking up to."

Some of these activities might not last in the long-term, but the choir? That's a different matter. In fact, approaching the second anniversary of Alan's death, Angela was deeply uncertain about whether to stay where she was or sell up and move closer to family. She decided to stay for at least another year, and, she says, "The choir was definitely part of that decision. I love it. Singing is going to be something I'll do, if I can, forever." **R**

Have you or someone you know completely changed their direction? We'd love to hear about them. Details on how to contact us are on page 6.

THE EXPERT VIEW

Jennifer Bibb from the Australian Music Therapy Association isn't surprised that singing in a choir gives Angela such a lift. Bibb is doing her PhD on the health and wellbeing aspects of singing in choirs and she says that research clearly shows both physical and psychological benefits. Among other things, "it can help to reduce stress and anxiety".

"The great thing about singing is it's accessible to everyone," Bibb says. "You don't have to have the financial resources or the skills or the knowledge you might need to play a musical instrument." Like Angela, she encourages people to try it, even if they feel nervous about their voice or think they "can't sing". "The focus is on participation and enjoyment. Singing with other people can provide people with a sense of belonging – feeling part of a community."

The wind-down time afterwards is also a valuable part of the experience. "In Angela's case the participants meet weekly to sing but they also share food and have a chat. So there's the singing itself and there's also the benefits of connecting with other people."