

My first Christmas

Linsay, Gillian and Mel have more reason than most to celebrate t

...my new husband



Linsay Black, 50, lives in Edinburgh with her husband, Martin, 50, and eight-year-old daughter, Chloe.

'Martin and I have only been married for two months, so this will be our first Christmas together; we're really looking forward to watching Chloe open her presents. Martin has lots of nieces and nephews

who we'll be seeing, and we're thrilled to have joined his big extended family.

It's about time Chloe and I had something to celebrate. My first husband, Douglas [Chloe's daddy], died in August 2006, after suffering from liver cancer. He was only 46, and it was a terrible shock. The Christmases that followed without Douglas

'I fell into his arms on Christmas Eve'

were awful, particularly the second one, because that's when the reality hit that I'd have to keep doing this, over and over again.

But, very slowly, the pain got easier to deal with — thanks, in part, to the WAY Foundation, a network of young widowed men and women supporting each other across the UK. I knew I couldn't keep living my life through Chloe, as it wasn't good for her, or me. So, last year, I tried online dating. Martin was one of the first people to contact me, and although he sounded very nice, I was worried about him being a widower. What if we spent the whole time crying? I needn't have worried. He had a great sense of humour and

This year, Linsay, Martin and Chloe can all finally look forward to Christmas

...my whole family together

Mel Mullen, 46, lives in Blackpool, Lancashire, with her husband, Jim, 62. She has four children: Gary, 27, Daniel, 22, Ben, 21, and Jade, 19.

'We're going out for lunch on Christmas Day, and I can't wait because for the first time in a long

time I'll have all four of my children with me. It will be a very special day as my eldest, Gary, is in the army and spent last Christmas in Afghanistan. He joined up ten years ago, when he was only 17, and since then we've only had him home for Christmas

four or five times. Last year was particularly hard. Gary was due to be home for the holidays

before going back to Afghanistan on Boxing Day. But then the call came telling him he had to return to duty early. It totally devastated me. Gary left on Christmas Eve and

we didn't get to talk to him again until just before New Year.

Having a son stationed in a war zone is terrible for any mum. You dread the knock at the door, or a strange car pulling up outside your house... Gary's been three times now, but his second tour was hardest for me. I couldn't

'I'm so terribly proud of my son'

as with...

his year. Kate Corr reports

I really enjoyed his company. And, as Martin's wife, Maureen, had died from cancer two years before, we understood each other perfectly.

Then last Christmas Eve, after we'd had a few dates, I invited him to a party at my house. Just before he arrived, I had a phone call to say that a dear uncle had terminal cancer. When I opened the door to Martin, who was holding a big bunch of flowers, I burst into tears. He hugged me tight, and that's when I knew that he was the one.

Luckily, he felt the same and two months later he asked very tentatively, "Shall we do the ring thing?" I smiled and said, "Yes!" Neither of us saw the point of a three-year engagement — after what we'd been through, we know you have to grab happiness when you can. We married in October, with Chloe as bridesmaid, and instead of presents we asked for donations to the hospices where Maureen and Douglas died.

I tell Martin constantly how much I love him. Sometimes I worry that I say it too much, but maybe it's because I've learned from experience how much those words really mean.

● **WAY Foundation** (www.wayfoundation.org.uk)

sleep at night and would get up at 3am, turn on the computer, and look for information about Afghanistan — anything to make me feel closer to my son. That's when I found Support Our Soldiers (a charity run by the families of soldiers fighting overseas), and realised that I wasn't the only mum who was shedding tears in the night. SOS has been a real godsend for me and I've thrown

...my new kidney

Gillian Ferguson, 47, lives in East Grinstead with her partner, Ian, 42.

'This Christmas, I intend to do some serious celebrating. I'll eat several helpings of Christmas pudding, have the odd glass of wine and go for lots of long country walks with Ian. I'll also be sure to speak to my big sister, Marjorie, who lives in Australia, and send her an extra-special present — because, this year, she gave me her kidney and, with it, a new lease of life.

I was diagnosed with kidney failure in 1996, but it wasn't until three years ago that I became really unwell and had to go on dialysis every night for eight hours.

I started my treatment a few weeks before Christmas, so by the big day, I was feeling very poorly. I

was also on a restricted diet, so pudding, chocolate, coffee and alcohol were all out. I remember lying on the sofa, unable to get up and make a cup of tea, thinking, 'I can't live my life like this.'

'My sister Marjorie gave me the gift of life'

Growing up, the seven-year age gap between Marjorie and I made a difference, but as we've got older we've grown closer.

I was incredibly touched when she offered me one of her kidneys, but I told her to think hard about it. She remained adamant, so after seeing

doctors and having tests (which showed her kidney was a very good match), she booked three months off work and flew to the UK. On 27th July this year, Marjorie gave me the gift of life.

We lay side-by-side in hospital before and after our operations; they both went incredibly well, but weren't without pain. Seeing Marjorie suffer and knowing it was for me was very humbling.

Now, six months on, I wake up feeling fresh and alert, and know that everything is possible. Marjorie is completely back to normal, too. It's wonderful to be healthy again, and it's all because of my sister.'

● **More than 10,000 people in the UK currently need a transplant.** For more information, call the NHS Organ Donor Register on 0300 123 2323, or visit www.organdonation.nhs.uk

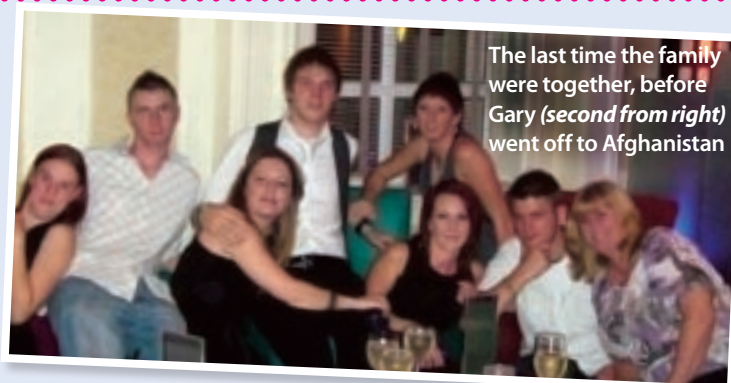


Marjorie gave Gillian (right) the best Christmas present ever

myself into working for them. It gives me a sense of purpose.

Gary's a corporal now, and he'll be back in Afghanistan again next year. He's joining a new regiment and I know his work will be dangerous, but he's devoted to it and I'm so terribly proud of him!

● **Support Our Soldiers** (call 01253 749671, or visit www.supportoursoldiers.co.uk)



The last time the family were together, before Gary (second from right) went off to Afghanistan