Dianne Stillwell 1956–2016

Dianne Stillwell, previously Assistant Director – Professional and Education at the Biochemical Society, sadly died peacefully in her sleep in May 2016. She worked for the Society for 12 years between 1985 and 1997. Science communication was her forte and she did this very well. Whether it was communicating through words or pictures or textiles or bunnies, she always seemed to know what to say and how to say it. In particular, Dianne was well known for her entertaining Christmas editions of The Biochemist.

Since leaving the Society in the 90’s, Dianne continued to apply her skills in communication at a number of notable scientific organizations including the Institute of Physics, the UK Energy Research Centre, the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research and more recently the Forestry Commission, where she had worked as Head of Communications since 2013.

Dianne had the rare ability of being able to make the world look good, the world sound good and particularly if gin and tonic was involved the world feel good. And it is for this reason that she touched so many lives.

Aged 18, Dianne left home and flew to New York to work as a nanny. She loved America and here she caught the travel bug. This was to be the first of many worldwide trips to come.

From America, Dianne went on to Newcastle University to study Biochemistry, which she squeezed into the odd few hours she had free in between devoting her every waking moment to Gilbert and Sullivan am-dram. Needless to say, she seamlessly achieved her degree, became a scientist and moved to London.

It was in her capacity as a bell ringer for a church in Twickenham that Dianne, aged 25, met Peter. She was living in Richmond at the time in a one-bedroom bedsit, roughly the size of a garage, but in her creative, meticulous way, Dianne transformed it into a bijou palace where all furnishings were colour or texture coordinated and everything seemed to fit. Even when all 6 foot 2 inches of Peter moved in, there managed to be enough room to throw a cat, which was just as well because Dianne adored cats.

Though there was a thirty-year age gap between them, Peter and Dianne connected. Both artistic - Peter was a graphic designer and photographer - both passionate francophiles, both keen bell ringers and foodies and intrepid explorers, they were made for each other.

Together, Peter and Dianne were instrumental in transforming the Landmark into the successful Arts Centre it is today. They played a big role in the running of the Blagdon Walk Estate and both, equally unflappable, threw great New Year’s Day parties and many a BBQ.

Dianne loved her work as a science communicator and was exceptional at explaining science so that it made sense. She was a founding member of STEMPRA, the network for science, technology PR and communications professionals, where she has been described as remaining a great “pillar of support and inspiration to everyone”.

Dianne cared greatly about professionalism and standards in the field of science communication. One colleague describes Dianne as having an intimate understanding of what reporters needed and always going the extra mile to help with their stories.

When Peter and Dianne moved to Munster Road in Teddington, Dianne must have been in a reverie presented with a whole, three-story blank canvas upon which to let loose her artistic passions.

With creative aplomb, she transformed with her skilled hands, every inch of the house into a work of art; blinds, sofa covers, cushions, wall hangings, pictures and the garden – an array of colour coordinated pots and plants.

When Peter died eight years ago after 27 years together with Dianne, there was the expectation that Dianne would be utterly lost. Peter was her rock, but she learned to live with the grief throwing herself heart and soul into her work and valuing the support and love of her closest friends and family.

Every Christmas she volunteered for the charity, CRISIS as a member of the sewing team, altering and repairing clothes for the homeless and making good use of her skills as a zealous member of the Embroiderer’s Guild. She also volunteered at the weekends as a receptionist at Princess Alice Hospice and was a dedicated supporter of the RSPB.

What came across most frequently about Dianne was her cracking sense of humour, her irreverence, her ability to cheer people up and put the world to rights and the fact that she was great fun to be with. She will be fondly remembered.