

A group of people are gathered around a long wooden table outdoors at night. They are holding and lighting sparklers, creating a warm, festive atmosphere. The table is set with wine glasses, water bottles, and small floral arrangements. In the background, strings of warm white lights are strung across the dark sky, illuminating the scene. The people are smiling and looking at each other, suggesting a joyful gathering.

Dinner, death and dessert

Two people who lost parents during their 20s have set up a supper party support group for others who are grieving. Elaine Lipworth joined a surprisingly joyous evening >>>

>>> **C**arla Fernandez and Lennon Flowers are putting the final touches to preparations for a dinner party, chopping vegetables and dressing salads. It's a 'pot-luck' candlelit supper on a Thursday evening and the 10 guests, mostly in their 20s and 30s, arrive laden with platters of food. On the menu: salmon, lentils, a sumptuous cheese board, decadent brownies – and death. You'd never know it from the animated chatter and clink of wine glasses, but the common denominator for this diverse group of people is bereavement.

Fernandez and Flowers are friends who run a thriving non-profit company, The Dinner Party, which they founded five years ago with the goal of connecting people dealing with the loss of a parent or another family member – a subject that is still largely taboo – so they can talk unreservedly about their grief.

'I had bigger questions'

Fernandez was 21 eight years ago when her father, José, died of brain cancer. While her close-knit family provided support, dealing with the bereavement was tough. 'One of the moments that hit me hardest was when we sat down to dinner, and his chair was empty. My dad was always the best company around the table at family dinners.' She felt alienated from her peers: 'I'd get the "deer in the headlights" look from people, because I was going through something that they simply didn't get. I craved something that felt like dinner with friends, where the conversation would be about the bigger questions that death raises, and what it means to live well afterwards.'

It was a similar story for Flowers, 32, whose mother Sue died of lung cancer 10 years ago. 'For years, my survival strategy was to avoid talking about her. I hated "The Pity Face" that I was inevitably met with, and didn't want to make people uncomfortable,' she says. Flowers met Fernandez at work and, discovering that

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they had a common bond, they began cooking for others who had experienced loss. The Dinner Party organisation grew rapidly from its roots in California, and now free evenings take place all over the United States, plus in 145 cities worldwide, including in the UK. Dinners are held regularly, to strengthen connections between people, and anyone can apply to host them in their own homes. Hosts are screened and trained by The Dinner Party team. Many diners are of a similar age to Fernandez and Flowers. 'I think we're a generation bereft of rituals, who came of age at the same time as the internet,' says Flowers. 'We're sceptical of institutions and anything that hints of bullshit, hence all the talk these days about "authenticity". We prefer experiences that are personal, peer-led, and a little DIY – instead of those in which we're simply passive recipients of a service.'

She feels that losing a parent as a young adult brings particular challenges. 'There is the isolation in being among the first of your peers to go through this,' she says. 'Society expects you to deal with it; you're an adult, you're expected to move through it quickly and be done with it – but we're learning to self-parent.'

British scientist Rosy Hosking often hosts dinners. She's been living in the US since 2011, but grew up in London with her mother, Denise, a single parent. Hosking never knew her Uruguayan father, Daniel Rubio, who met Hosking's mother, a teacher, during a trip to London. Hosking was born in 1980 and three

years later, her mother heard that Rubio, 33, had died in a car crash. Hosking says he was never mentioned 'until I got to my 20s and it all bubbled up'.

A special network

She eventually visited her father's family in Montevideo, 'but it was weird as I had no connection with them'. Still working through powerful emotions about her father, Hosking says The Dinner Party has given invaluable support. 'It's an incredible feeling connecting with others about what is *really* going on for you, rather than just the usual chit-chat about what you do for a living.'

Hosking has a 16-month-old daughter, Carla, with her husband Robert. Having her own family, she says, brought up her loss again: 'I see how fantastically my husband is doing at being a dad. I see how my daughter has what I never had.'

In Britain, there are groups in London, Oxford and Glasgow, with more in the pipeline. Naomi Barrow, 23, a peer support worker in the NHS, plans to set up a branch in York. Her mother, Fiona Hicks, a doctor specialising in palliative care, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2012. She was given the all-clear but, in 2014, she discovered the cancer had spread to her spine, sternum and liver. Barrow took a break from university, and returned to the family home to spend time with her mother, father and two brothers. 'Mum and I got so close,' she says. 'She carried on working for a year after she was diagnosed.' Her

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mother was an inspiration. 'She felt it was important to talk about death. It was part of her job. I'm grateful, as it enabled us to talk about her illness and death openly as a family.' Touchingly, her mum knitted three baby cardigans for her potential grandchildren before she died in 2015, at the age of 53.

'Bereavement can be isolating,' says Barrow. Her biggest challenge after her mother's death, she says, was trying to go back to being a normal 20-year-old – going out, watching TV and having hobbies: 'It was impossible. Everyone else is fancy-free and has their parents.'

At dinner in California, the group is deep in conversation, and it is clear that

talking about grief is therapeutic. Cody Brinton, 32, lost both her parents by the time she was 28, and says The Dinner Party was a lifeline. 'I was 19 when my mum was diagnosed with cancer. She was my life. Then, three years ago, my dad dropped dead with a heart condition. I was like, "I'm 28, and I'm going to another funeral. How is this fair?"'

The group talk about normal life, work and relationships, but the chat always comes back to life after loss.

Do dinners get depressing? 'Just the opposite,' says Fernandez. 'Of course there are tears, but there's a lot of joy. It is more about life than loss.'

thedinnerparty.org

The liberation of sharing our sorrow

The Dinner Party regulars explain how the company of kindred spirits helps them heal

“With 'normal' friends, you hesitate before talking about death or loss because you don't want to be the one to bring down the atmosphere a notch. Having an environment in which you can leap over several years of small talk to get to the 'big' conversation is a really transformative experience.”

Rosy Hosking

“I blog about my experiences, but The Dinner Party takes that reassurance offline and moves it into a real discussion; gives it a 'human' form. It is a really safe and accessible way to talk about death and the loss of a loved one, with others who really understand.”

Naomi Barrow

“I know that it sounds strange, but my relationship with my mother has continued to evolve since her death, and The Dinner Party is a big part of that. I have an active way of keeping her memory and legacy alive. I've been able to work through anger and disappointment and the things that we didn't get a chance to resolve in her lifetime.”

Carla Fernandez

“The first Dinner Party soirée that I attended was a sob fest – I cried and cried. I didn't know anyone around my age in my personal life who had lost their parents, so to connect with people who have experienced that kind of grief was both cathartic and inspirational.”

Cody Brinton