



With her younger sister, Jemma



On holiday in Bolivia



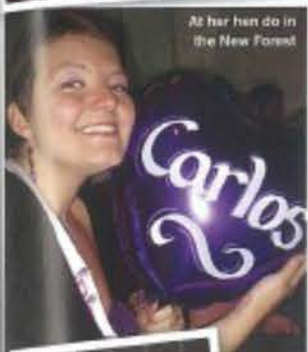
A 'Minnie' break at Disneyland Paris



At home in Croydon, Surrey

'I'll always love you Jo'

When Jo Harris died 11 days before her wedding aged just 29, her family and fiancé Carlos knew there was only one way to celebrate her wonderful life



At her hen do in the New Forest



Jo as a baby



With Carlos and sister Isabel at her graduation



During chemotherapy



Sinking a pose at an '80s night



Celebrating a friend's wedding

When Jo waved goodbye to me as she and her friends drove off for her hen weekend, she was as excited as the day we'd first met. My first ever vision of Jo was of her bounding down the corridor at my friend's halls of residence, dressed as a naughty schoolgirl. She'd demanded to know why I wasn't kitted out in the right costume for the school-disco night, before dragging me off for a night of dancing to '80s music.

healthy 28-year-old. But she saw her GP, who booked her in for a mammogram. "We didn't give it much thought as a few days later we were flying to Malaysia for a holiday. Besides, the GP had told Jo the results would take a month to come through. "During our holiday, I organised a picnic and proposed to Jo. We decided to get

'THERE WAS NO WAY THE CANCER WOULD STOP US GETTING MARRIED'

married on 3 October the following year – eight years to the day after our first date. "As soon as we came home, Jo was straight on the phone telling her family and friends. But our happiness was shattered a

week later when Jo went with her mum to get the results of her mammogram. No one was expecting bad news. In hindsight, I wished I'd been the one there with Jo. "I was coming back from work when she rang my mobile. 'They've found a tumour. I've got breast cancer,' Jo said, her voice shaking. It was such a bolt out of the blue, but I really believed Jo would be OK. "A week later, though, tests revealed that Jo's cancer had spread to her liver. All I could do was put my arm around her – and try to stop her from trembling. As the doctor gently explained that they would do everything they could to prolong her life, the reality of what he was saying slowly dawned on us. 'If we start treatment straight away,' said the doctor, 'it's possible you'll live for another few years.' I looked at Jo and watched her eyes fill with tears. "There were a lot of tears that night, but Jo said she was determined to live as >

long as possible. She looked at me and said, 'I'm a fighter and I'm going to fight this!' "We decided there was no way the cancer was going to stop us from getting married. Jo was in her element organising every tiny detail of our wedding, from the church service to the flowers. "In May last year, Jo had her last of chemo, and organised an 'end of chemo' karaoke party in London's Leicester Square for about 20 friends and family. As usual, she was the first up for singing, belting out her favourite girl bands and '80s songs. "Talking to her friends, I realised Jo hadn't been entirely honest about the seriousness of her condition. Some of them even thought Jo was cured. But that was typical of her – she didn't want any pity. A week later, when scan results showed the chemo had shrunk the tumours, it finally seemed our luck had changed.

"But in August another scan showed both tumours were growing and the cancer had now spread to her bones. The doctors put Jo on another kind of oral chemotherapy. Even though she didn't have as much energy, she and her sister Jemma still went to their weekly dance class. Even I went so we could practise the first dance to *Mero* by Enrique Iglesias at our wedding. "By now the wedding was a just few weeks away, so Jo and her family and friends went off for a hen weekend. They partied, sang and even all had a rock'n'roll dance lesson. When Jo returned, she was on cloud nine, but she looked shattered. "Jo said she was going to have a lie down, but a while later she called down to me and said she was finding it hard to breathe. I phoned the hospital, who said to take her in straight away. We both thought she'd be fine though, and the next day she put a request in for Wham! or the hospital radio. Her sister Jemma and I left her sitting up in her bed having a boogie. I honestly believed she'd be back home soon. "But 24 hours later, everything changed. Jo was taken into

intensive care. By the time her family arrived at the hospital, she was slipping in and out of consciousness. "We asked her consultant what was happening. 'The next few hours are going to be critical,' he said. Jo is very unwell. I knew then I was losing my Jo, and that she was never going to be my bride. "Later that day, a nurse asked if I'd like a priest to give us a wedding blessing. It was a lovely idea, so I leant over to Jo and whispered: 'We're going to have a wedding blessing, but it's not in place of the wedding. It's just in case we have to postpone it.' Jo nodded, and it took every ounce of strength I had not to break down in tears.

"All Jo's family gathered around the bed for the blessing. We'd made a pact not to cry in front of Jo, but I knew everyone's heart was breaking along with my own.

'LOOKING AT MY BRIDE IN HER COFFIN WAS THE HARDEST THING'

"Then, an hour-and-a-half later, the nurses carefully unhooked the machinery that was monitoring Jo's heart rate and breathing and, after a while, as I held Jo's hand, she took her last breath. She died at 7.45pm on 22 September 2009. I felt so alone. I was just 11 days away from marrying the most amazing woman in the world. "Over the next few days, I sat down with Jo's family and we talked about her funeral. We decided Jo would have wanted to be buried wearing her wedding dress, and for the funeral to be held on the day we'd originally planned to marry. "A few days later I went to the wedding shop and spent an emotional hour chatting to the woman who had served her. The dress she'd picked was lovely. Later on, I went with Jo's family and my parents to see her in the chapel of rest. Looking at my bride, in her beautiful dress, lying in a coffin was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I



Carlos and Jo never got to enjoy the wedding they planned

spent an hour with Jo on my own, saying the things I wanted to say to her. I was so relieved the undertakers had done such a good job. Jo really did look lovely. "On Saturday, 3 October last year, our wedding day, I buried Jo in the same church in which we would have made our vows. In keeping with the wedding Jo had so wanted, everyone wore the dresses and suits they'd bought for the occasion. "Afterwards, we went to the venue where we would have held the reception and ate and drank what Jo had so meticulously planned. It sounds strange, but it was a nice day. Surrounded by the people we loved the most, I kept thinking that if Jo had been there she'd have been dragging everyone up to dance. She would have loved it. "It's been eight months since I buried Jo, and I miss her terribly. The weekends are particularly difficult, especially Saturday nights when we'd curl up together on the sofa. "What happened to Jo was a tragedy, but she never treated it as that. Instead, she got on with her life and enjoyed every minute the best she could. My one consolation is that three days before she died, she was having a ball at her hen night, doing what she loved – dancing, singing and having fun. The image of Jo's beautiful, happy face will never leave me." • Carlos will be donating his fee for this piece to the Royal Marsden Hospital, London. Send your own donation to www.royalmarsden.org at the 'gift in memoriam' page. @

Bubbly Jo enjoying a break in Paris

