

# Farewell to the queen of The Fun Branch

*Gayle Nichol - April 2024*

I was a young reporter in the 90s when I was lucky enough to work with a like-minded group of people who created the most supportive, engaging and active workplace environment I have ever been a part of.

I had already suffered a few blows at the hands of unethical companies, executives and coworkers, so I knew a good thing when I had it.

And this was good.

Really good.

We were so much on the right side of things – fiscally, productively and in terms of engagement – that we were literally known in the Sun Media corporate structure as The Fun Branch.

Years ticked by and corporate sales and industry dismantling scattered most of us to the winds, connected only distantly through social media and random sightings.

But last month, news travelled through the sparse remaining network of The Fun Branch that one of our number, Dianne Fletcher, had left us.

Dianne died at the age of 77.

The picture of a proper English lady, Dianne and I bonded over my love of all things England and her willingness to share her stories of life growing up in the Absolutely Fabulous Newton-le-Willows. Dianne was so posh, even the town she left behind dazzled with its moniker.

I learned much from Dianne, especially as a young woman in the corporate world. She was always eager to lend a perspective, a caution, or even a rebuke – often whether I was open to her input or not.

It's important that I not paint Dianne as a saint.

She wouldn't like that.

She wanted to challenge the accepted way of thinking and she especially wanted that from me. We would regularly chat it up about something I had written or something that was happening in the city, in the country or in the world that she wanted me to consider, to reconsider, or to reconsider again if she felt it merited her continued challenge.

She once approached me about a column I had written. She wasn't impressed and we debated for some time the merits of the piece. We eventually parted company, she having made her point, and me soundly rejecting it.

Last year, I had reason to pull up that exact piece and 20 years after our conversation I remembered our debate... and had to concede that she had been right all along.

She was formidable in her approach, first as a newspaper sales representative to get the best for her clients, then later for the company as she worked in finance and administration to keep accounts in order.

Peter Wilpstra who helmed The Fun Branch remembers her setting off to make some rather difficult collection calls, reminding her to keep a softness to her edge. She would return promising that she had, but with a half smile that let us know there might have been some of the old Newton-le-Willow spice in the soft edge.

I think everyone at that office had a very prim British accent with which to greet Dianne... she just called out for it. And we all loved her for it. She was often called Lady Di with nothing short of genuine affection.

As former reporter Emma Cooper said upon learning of Dianne's passing, "she was more like the Queen than the Queen!"

It's true. There was always something "just so" about Dianne. But there was also something equally cheeky.

One Christmas, in the pre-woke work environment of the saucy 90s, we were making a mockingly racy calendar for one of the salesmen. I approached Dianne with a stack of \$20s, fully expecting her to primly decline participation. Instead, she fanned out the stack of bills undid a top button and tucked them neatly into her décolletage, looking up to deadpan, "Right, how's this?"

Just when you thought you knew what to expect, Dianne showed you a new layer.

She was a staunch supporter of right. I witnessed her offer protection and support countless times to people in need, often being the nudge that a young woman needed to stand up in an environment that didn't always provide equal footing.

Last time news of Dianne travelled through the remains of The Fun Branch grapevine, it was to

tell of a dinner to celebrate her retirement. Years after we had all parted, one by one we straggled into a Sarnia establishment to sit at a long table and toast our Lady Di. She was visibly moved by the numbers that continued to trickle through the door, and it wasn't too long before we noticed a quiver in that stiff British upper lip.

We were all together for what is now the last time.

Six years ago, when I finally made it to England, I thought several times to contact Dianne and let her know I had made my dream come true, and her homeland was every bit as magical as she had always promised it would be.

I wish I had followed through.

I was afraid that she would have thought it strange for me to reach out after all these years. But I'm sure she would have celebrated it as a success.

That's what Dianne did. She was a supporter. A cheerleader.

And as Jeff Cooper remembers of Dianne from The Fun Branch, no matter the circumstance, "she was always a proper British lady."