

Patricia
Ilhan

EXCLUSIVE

Life after Crazy John

The phone mogul's widow speaks to GLEN WILLIAMS about love, loss, and how her family is moving on

Patricia Ilhan's eyes light up and she bursts into laughter as she recalls the first time she met Crazy John Ilhan, the man who would be her soul mate.

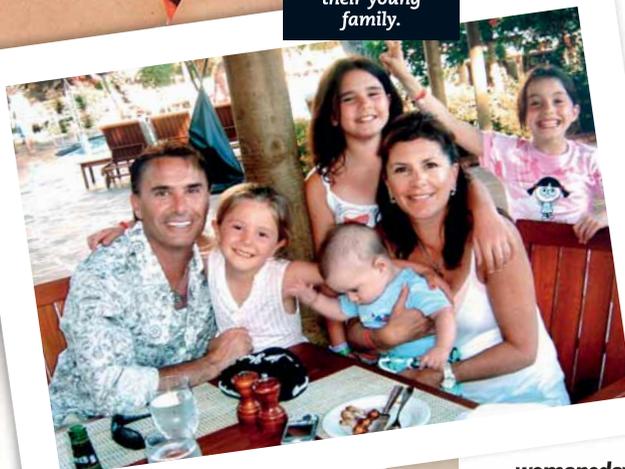
She was an account manager with Telstra and was asked to "babysit" this mobile phone dealer who was "never going to make anything of himself". Little did she know this "no-hoper", who ran a mobile phone shop in Melbourne's Brunswick, would soon become Australia's richest man under 40, and that she would fall quickly under his spell.

"When I met him I thought he was just this young floozy from Broady, Broadmeadows, one of Melbourne's poorest suburbs," she says. "He had little formal education. He had no boundaries, and this was reflected in the way he did business. He believed he could do anything and he wasn't restricted by what marks he achieved in school."

Within three months of meeting Crazy John, Patricia knew she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. But Crazy John, a Muslim migrant from Turkey, battling to establish his phone business, wasn't quite ready for her.

"We were in a restaurant and I said to him, 'You're going to be my husband and you're going to be the father of my children,'" Patricia recalls with ▶▶

Patricia and Crazy John with their young family.



womansday.ninemsn.com.au | 55



Patricia, son Aydin, and daughters Yasmin, Hannah and Jaida treasure their memories of their "crazy" husband and dad.

'I made as much of a stable life as I can for the children ... though it's never going to be the same'

a laugh. "He was drinking coffee at the time and he spat it everywhere with the shock of my announcement.

"He said, 'How could you possibly know that?' and I just replied, 'Oh, I know, and I'll just wait until you realise it too.' I think it took him about a year before he fully realised.

"It was intuition. I knew he was for me. He was my soul mate, and I knew he had a great relationship with his mum and dad, and that he'd be a great dad and husband."

What she didn't know, and only found out the night he proposed, was that Crazy John had started to amass a fortune. The so-called "no-hoper" she'd been asked to "babysit", was in fact a multimillionaire.

They would enjoy 11 years of marriage, create a wonderful family, daughters Yasmin, now 11, Hannah, 10, and Jaida, 8, and son Aydin, 2, and enjoy the best that life had to offer.

Patricia's world was shattered on the morning of October 23, 2007, when John didn't return from his daily walk along Brighton Beach. The seemingly fit dad had collapsed on a nearby soccer field. An autopsy revealed he had

a hereditary heart condition. Spookily, John had confided to Patricia on a number of occasions that he wouldn't live a long life.

"I never took that concern seriously," she says. "I'd tell him, 'You'll be right, stop being silly.' He never drank, he wasn't overweight, and he played soccer for 25 years. He'd even taken out an insurance policy two years before he died, and they made him do extensive stress tests and found nothing."

Patricia rallied to protect her children and provide as normal a life as possible following John's shock death.

"What happens is life goes on," she says. "I made as much of a stable life as I can for the children, even though I know it's never going to be the same."

She pays tribute to dear friends Shane and Simone Warne who, she says, have been with her every step of the way.

"My daughter Yasmin and Shane and Simone's daughter Brooke are best friends," she says with a smile. "We look after each others' children.

"I don't see Shane the way he is portrayed publicly. I see him as a man who would do anything for me and the children. Their friendship is one of the reasons I have been able to come through this. I have my wonderful family and dear friends surrounding me."

Patricia also has wonderful memories of her marriage.

"It was just one roller-coaster adventure after another," she says. "In the last five years we travelled to Europe three times a year, we'd try a new country each time. We were like little kids playing in a fairytale world.

But for every cent John spent on his family, he was discreetly donating huge amounts to charity, and paying for countless less fortunate people to be educated.

"John's father, whom he adored, had a mantra, 'What have you done to help people today?'" Patricia, 45, says. "John lived by that mantra. He'd be doing all these generous deeds. I only found out about many of

them after he passed away.

"John used to say, 'I can sleep at night. I can enjoy my family because I know I've been able to give to the broader community.'"

Patricia says she will continue to keep Crazy John's many philanthropic commitments going. This includes the Ilhan Food Allergy Foundation. Patricia and John started this in 2006 following their daughter Jaida's life-threatening allergic reaction after she kissed her father, who had been eating nuts.

Patricia gazes proudly at her children at play. She knows it's sad John is not going to be here for the many milestones ahead, but she says she still feels him near.

"We talk about him all the time. We're surrounded by his photos and the happy memories. I still talk to him, and every time I hear a U2 song, particularly his favourite, *One*, I think of him. He touched so many lives in such a positive way. He will be with me for the rest of my life."

'John Ilhan: A Crazy Life', by Stephen Dabkowski and Annie Reid, is out this month.

PICTURES: GINA MILICIA. HAIR AND MAKE-UP: JULIAN JONES.