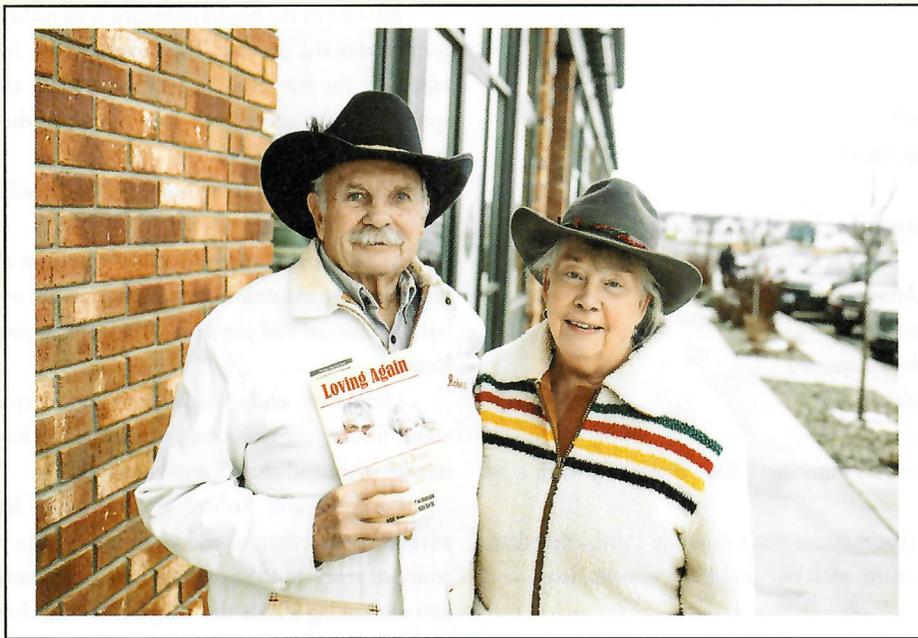


How Widows & Widowers

Find Love Online



*Article by Jessica Renstrom
Photos by Littles + Bigs Photography*

Choosing dating profile photos, crafting flirtatious messages, and feeling the rush of butterflies aren't experiences often associated with life in your 70s, but Robert Mitchell and Gail Cushman are challenging that notion. Their love story is full of curiosity, adventure, and what happens when two people of any age decide to take a chance on something new.

Author Gail Cushman was married to her husband for 53 years before he passed. "When your partner dies, suddenly you're not part of a couple anymore," explains Gail. "Friends don't know what to do with you. They're afraid to mention your husband. They're afraid you'll cry. So instead, they say nothing. People think they'll hurt you by saying the wrong thing, but the wrong thing is saying nothing at all."

It's a reality Robert Mitchell, author and retired rancher, knows just as well. After the death of his wife of 42 years, he, too, felt the slow drift of friends and the isolation that comes when routines and relationships change overnight.

Social isolation can be especially profound for retirees. After all, there's no more work to go to every day, and adult children are often busy with their own lives. But this deep loneliness isn't just emotionally uncomfortable; it can be a danger to one's health. Studies increasingly link social isolation to cognitive decline and poor health outcomes. "You have to exercise your brain," Robert says. "Everyone needs connection."

Over time, many widows and widowers don't even realize how lonely they've become, until something breaks through the silence. For Robert, that moment came courtesy of his grandson, who approached him, saying, "Grandpa, we need to talk. You know, before she died, Grandma told me, 'Grandpa is going to sink. You gotta help him; he needs to find someone else.' So, Grandpa, you need to get out there, date, meet people."

"What do you mean?" Robert asked. His grandson's reply? "The internet, everybody is doing it."

So, Robert tried something new: online dating.

A MONTANA COWBOY LOVE STORY

With a new photo taken by his niece and some research on dating sites under his belt, Robert took the leap. Shortly after joining several sites, he realized something unexpected: he had discovered a powerful antidote to loneliness.

He was talking with multiple women from across Montana and beyond, about all kinds of things: horses, kids, life. Then one day, while scrolling during a break from hauling grain, he saw Gail's photo. She was standing beside a canal lock.

Unbeknownst to him at the time, Gail had created a profile just the day before. While she had initially joined online dating as research for a novel she was writing, she was also testing the online dating waters

for herself, intrigued by the idea. "I felt comfortable with my life," she says, "yet somewhat bored and probably stale in my thinking. And, if I wanted to continue to write books, I needed some adventures."

Little did she know what a grand adventure was waiting in her next message.

Robert opened a simple exchange with Gail about the canal lock in her photo, and it flowed over multiple days. Finally, Robert asked Gail the three adventure-seeking questions he posed to every potential date:

1. *Can you swim?*
2. *Do you have a passport?*
3. *Would you like to go to Paris?*

Gail's answers stood out instantly:

1. *Yes, she was a former Marine.*
2. *Yes, she'd been to 27 countries.*
3. *And when he asked about Paris, she simply replied, "Why do you ask?"*

His response came the next morning: "Well, that's easy. *Paris is for lovers.*"

What followed from that message was a carefully chosen first date, then a second, and then a third, each one building curiosity, trust, and comfort.

Before long, they were traveling together, taking chances, and saying "yes" to experiences that bring them joy (like a trip to Paris!). Gail and Robert have been married for two years, and their life together is filled with adventure: international travel, spontaneous excursions, shared writing, and storytelling. But their days are also filled with the quieter rituals that matter just as much: Friday date nights they never miss, showing up for one another at doctors' appointments, and long stretches of pillow talk at the end of the day, moments they never take for granted.

WHY THEY WROTE *LOVING AGAIN*

As Gail and Robert's story circulated among friends, fellow travelers, and casual acquaintances, one conversation seemed to happen again and again....

"When people heard how we met, they'd say, 'I could never do that,'" Gail says. "And we'd say, 'Yes, you can.'"

This exchange sparked the idea for their book: *Loving Again: A Guide to Online Dating for Widows and Widowers*.

The couple realized that while many people their age were interested in connecting with others, traditional ways of meeting people can be challenging. For many, workplaces are gone; social circles have shrunk; and bars and singles events may be geared toward a younger audience.

By comparison, online dating offers something different: access, intention, and the ability to connect on one's own terms. That said, seniors can feel overwhelmed by technology, uncertain about safety, and emotionally conflicted about moving forward after a loss.

"People don't know where to start," Robert explains. "Or they are afraid they'll make a mistake."

Drawing from their own experiences and dozens of conversations with other widows and widowers, Gail and Robert decided to create a guide that was both reassuring and practical. The book blends their personal stories with step-by-step guidance on everything from writing an online profile to navigating first dates, setting boundaries, staying safe, and recognizing red flags. It's full of useful resources, even including an online dating glossary and self-examination Play-by-Play Book.

But one of the book's strengths is its realism. Gail and Robert don't romanticize the process. They acknowledge fear, grief, and hesitation, especially the fear of loving someone again after having already lost a spouse. At the same time, they challenge the notion that safety and stagnation are the same.

"There's risk in doing nothing, too," Gail says. "Loneliness doesn't go away on its own."

The book also addresses misconceptions about later-in-life dating, including the assumption that older adults no longer desire intimacy, both emotional and physical. "That part of you doesn't disappear," says Robert.

Ultimately, online dating isn't about replacing what was lost. It's about finding companionship: someone to have coffee with, go to the movies with, and share a good conversation.

For Gail and Robert, online dating has led to a life full of adventure, connection, and gratitude. It required stepping out of their comfort zones, but the rewards have been immeasurable. And after all, isn't embracing a little risk worth it for the chance at joy? That spirit of bold, wholehearted living is captured perfectly in a quote they chose to feature at the beginning of their book:

"LIFE SHOULD NOT BE
A JOURNEY TO THE GRAVE
WITH THE INTENTION OF
ARRIVING SAFELY IN A PRETTY
AND WELL-PRESERVED BODY,
BUT RATHER TO SKID IN
BROADSIDE
IN A CLOUD OF SMOKE,
THOROUGHLY USED UP,
TOTALLY WORN OUT,
AND LOUDLY PROCLAIMING,
WOW! WHAT A RIDE!"

-HUNTER S. THOMPSON, AMERICAN JOURNALIST.

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