

EJ MONTINI | **Opinion** *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

How a grieving Arizona widow found her new happily-ever-after in Africa

Tami Loehrs and her husband, Dave, were living out all of their wildest dreams together, until tragedy struck.



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Tami Loehrs had been living what she called “the perfect life.”

She was married to her soulmate, Dave. She had a wildly successful career as a nationally known expert in digital forensics, based in Tucson. She and her husband traveled all over the world, living out their dreams and their wildest adventures.

She never imagined, until November of 2018, that her happily-ever-after would have another ... “after.”

But it did.

After losing her husband, she visited Africa

It began the moment Dave was diagnosed with glioblastoma, an aggressive brain cancer.

“We had done a 50-mile mountain bike race in the White Mountains,” she told me, “and then were headed to Costa Rica. But almost from the beginning of that trip Dave didn’t feel well. And it just got worse. Not too long after that we got the diagnosis.”

There were surgeries, and a brief return to normalcy, but it didn’t last.

“When I lost him I felt like I was lost, too,” said Tami, who is 58. “I had a very difficult time, a really dark time. I thought maybe getting away for a bit would help.

“We had been all over the world together, but the one place we hadn’t gone — partly because he didn’t have a desire to go there — was Africa. So I thought, OK, I’ll try that.”

Home didn't feel like home anymore

She chose Rwanda in east-central Africa, not only because it has a reputation for natural beauty (it's been called the "land of a thousand hills"), but also because it contains Volcanoes National Park, home to a preserve housing the mountain gorillas made famous by the work of primatologist Dian Fossey (and the movie about her work, "Gorillas in the Mist.")

"I did some of the usual things in Africa, the safaris," Loehrs said. "But I really felt a connection to the gorillas. From the first time I went on a gorilla trek and a gorilla there just kind of leaned into me, as if welcoming me. I loved it. It was as if I was home."

She said when she returned to the states she fell again into a depression.

"I had trouble explaining the sense of loss I felt," Loehrs said, "and I didn't want to spend my days feeling sad, being unhappy."

So, she went back to Africa.

"I fell in love with Rwanda," she said. "I had sold my business to my daughter, and I began to wonder if I could start a business here. Do something where I could give back. And after looking around a bit, I settled on coffee. People here are still heavy tea drinkers, so the coffee market isn't saturated the way it is in the states. And the coffee here is fantastic. So I thought — give it a try."

Loehrs found happiness with gorillas and coffee

She decided to start a coffee company. Yes, just like that.

"I know how to run a business," she said. "This is entirely different, of course, but I figured if I got the right people around me it would work out. I've met all the farmers. I've learned the process. I've been to the co-op.

"I was going to build a little coffee shop, too, but that has turned into a large two-story facility with a café on the bottom and a space on top that will hold about 150 people with views for miles. It will have a bar, live entertainment and space for events. The plan is to funnel profits back into the economy here, to the farmers and others. And to provide support for the gorillas."

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It's a lot of work, but in getting through it Loehrs has found something she hadn't expected — happiness.

“I decided to take the plunge, to move here,” she said, speaking to me from her house in Musanze, not too far from Volcanoes National Park. “The people here are among the nicest I've ever met. And they love what I'm doing. I've made some incredible friends since I've moved here. It's been amazing.”

Rwanda has become the perfect place to grieve

Her adult children fully supported the move.

She recently got an export license for her company — Silverbacks Coffee — and is planning for sales in the U.S. She's also now been on more than a dozen gorilla treks.

“They invite you into their families,” she said. “The experts tell me the gorillas can feel your pain. I believe they can. But, for me, it's also this place that comforts me.

“I've known people who lost a spouse and they were dating in a couple of months. I still wear my wedding ring. I'm still very much in love with my husband, and haven't seen anyone.

“And the people here — there's no judgement. They don't act like it's something I should get over. It's lovely, really. It's a bit extreme, of course, but it works for me. I wake up happy.”

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