

Volunteer Link Up

Sophie Law_ befriending volunteer

“She was a legend”

Sophie registered as a VLU befriender in February 2021 and was matched with a client, L, in April 2021. Sophie befriended L until December 2021.

During the first lockdown a few of us teamed up in the close where we live in Ducklington and put a leaflet through everyone's door in the street – there's quite a few bungalows, a number of elderly people – we got a good response, and we were able to help people. I felt powerless about my parents, who live in Hertfordshire, that I couldn't just go and do stuff for them, and it started me thinking that once things had calmed down a bit I would really like to go and do something round here. That's when I signed up to Volunteer Link Up, as a befriender – I got the information through, which was a bit like dating trying to pick a person! I ended up volunteering for someone just up my street which worked out brilliantly.



I realised when I first went to see her that I had seen her walking around the village so that was nice, it was a comfort for her. She had dementia and was a bit reticent to start with but the fact we lived on the same road helped and we were able to bond quite quickly. She only ever knocked on my door once, otherwise I would make an appointment to see her. She would say hi as we walked past, and she would see my boys as we walked to school.

I have a close-knit family and a lovely friendship group and hate the idea of people being lonely and especially people being lonely 10m from my door. If I can just hook up with one person, have a chat with them and a cup of tea, it's no bother. It's a wonderful thing to do and it has benefitted both of us. She did say, 'I'm so lonely,' and 'I'd like to know more people' often when I first went round. Her children would call her, but I think it's the face-to-face interaction she was missing. She had carers going in, but they have a job to do. There was no agenda with us - just pop round for a natter, ask how she's feeling, go out for a slice of cake. You are there to be a friend rather than provide a service. We did a lot of walking round the village, out to the lake and back. A couple of times she needed to go to the bank. Her carers asked me and so I took her, again, to me that's nothing, I've got a car, it took 20 minutes, but it saved them having to sort something else out. The Volunteer Link Up transport service took her to the dentist at one point, just little things but they can make such a difference.

I would go about once a week to see her. It started off with a phone call on a Saturday, but she wasn't great on the phone, so I started to say why don't I just pop round instead? I did that initially, unannounced, knowing when her carers were going in so trying to pick a day and time that she wasn't seeing anyone else. She had a diary by the front door so I used to write in the next time I would be coming. If I called her she couldn't translate words down on to the page very well anymore. Instead, I would say to her, 'oh this day's empty shall I come then?' If her carers needed anything else they could write it down in the diary for me to see or message me and we could sort it out.

I suffered with guilt during the pandemic. It made me feel better that I was doing something tangible and stopping someone being lonely who was on my road, so close to my house.

My absolute favourite memory is when I took her for a cup of tea and cake at Aston Pottery. I had told her where we were going to go, ran it past her a couple of times, so she knew it was happening.

I got her in the car and took her there and she was just beaming the whole time. She was like a bird she was so thin, but she wolfed this gigantic slice of Victoria sponge down and a big cup of tea! She just kept saying, 'this is so lovely,' 'this is so lovely.' Then she saw someone she knew, and she stopped and had a chat and honestly my heart just sang that day. We always had a nice time, and we always had a laugh but that was special. We planned to do more of that but the second time I went to take her was when unfortunately, the ambulance was there, and she was taken into hospital, she wasn't very well.

But even sitting and having a cuppa made a difference I think. She did not mince her words at all, which I like, she said at one point, 'well, you're very easy to get along with.' Her son said that it calmed him that there was someone looking out for her and giving her kindness which was nice. I think it's helped us both and I can't imagine not doing it again now. I would recommend it to anyone – it just makes you feel so good, not necessarily about yourself, but it gives you a good feeling. You know that you are turning the world on. Someone, somewhere else, might help your family, your friends. I love that – pay it forward.

She seemed quite unhappy when I first started going round. She was in that horrible stage where she was aware that she had dementia. She grew up around here, had moved away and come back and kept saying she shouldn't have moved away because she didn't know enough people around here. She was blaming herself for her lack of local community, but I thought you're clearly a strong and impulsive lady and that's who you are, and you can't change what you've done. We chatted a lot about that.

She would really light up when she talked about the past. We would natter on about horses a lot, she loved horses and had worked in a stables. It's that thing; I'm not her daughter trying to do 15 other things when she calls and I'm not her carer with five different other people to go and see...I've got half an hour to just talk about horses and that's not much to ask is it? She could access her distant memories easily, so whilst she got distracted making me a cup of tea, she could talk to me about being in the stables in Eynsham for 20 minutes non-stop and she enjoyed that.

I went to see her in hospital which was a real privilege as there were only 2 or 3 of us going in. I was able to message her son and say I've seen her today and this is how she is doing. I sat and spent 20 minutes with her. Sometimes she knew I was there, sometimes she didn't. It was a huge privilege to be able to help someone in that way – your kids are miles away, working, with their own lives. When you're in hospital for a period like she was, it was 4-5 weeks, of course you drop everything when they first go into hospital, but you can't come every day if you're living 100 miles away it's just not practical. So, to do something like that was brilliant; it really felt like I was helping.

She was a legend. It was amazing to see all the photos at her funeral, many of them taken when she was young – I got a glimpse into her life that she hadn't talked about so much. She was quite worried about a lot of stuff, not sure whether that was the dementia or not. But because I was a stranger she could yap away to me about all those concerns. She could get things off her chest and every time I came away I could tell she was a bit lighter. There is a lot that a stranger can bring that a family member or carer can't.

Her funeral was rammed, which I thought to myself was so mad, that there are so many people here that obviously loved and cared for her, but she still felt lonely with the day-to-day stuff, and I think that's where befrienders can make a real difference.

It was through the radio that I chose Volunteer Link Up. I knew I wanted to volunteer, following what we'd done with the people in our street during the pandemic. I was looking for an organisation and before I'd had the chance to do lots of research, it fell right into my lap! It had to be befriending; I love the idea of a cuppa and a chat. The stuff that people don't have time for as they're too busy or doing a job. To try and help someone in some other way that's what I think is amazing about volunteer befrienders. You do have the time – you are only there for a chat. Chatting is lovely. Friendship and kindness are such important things in this world, currently. Just fantastic.