



Where a warm welcome, laughter and chat can overcome isolation of old age



Old age can be desperately lonely for some people, but one charity works to save the elderly from isolation using the recipe of tea, cakes and new friends. Sheena Hastings investigates.

EILEEN and Irene live very close to each other but it's highly questionable whether they would ever have met had they been left to their own devices.

Ten years ago Eileen, now 82, lost Gordon, her husband of 52 years. She describes herself as "the shy type", and, after her loss, was too upset to go out apart from the odd trip to the shops. The loneliest day was Sunday, which seemed to stretch into eternity with no companionship.

She and Gordon had been a quiet couple yet they did have a social life, says Eileen. But visiting the places they used to go to together made her too sad. "One day I was in a local shop and the assistant there told me about a charity that organised small Sunday afternoon tea parties for the elderly in the area to meet each other. She contacted the co-ordinator, who came to see me and explained how it worked.

"A volunteer driver comes and picks me up at about 2.30pm and takes me to the home of a host, who's also a volunteer, and there are seven other guests. We talk and have tea, and at about 5.30pm we are brought home again. The time passes so quickly - we chat and chat, and it's always very enjoyable. In between tea parties we can keep in touch by phone or see each other if we can.

"The first time I went I felt too shy to talk to anyone and wasn't sure I'd go again. But I did, and now you can't shut me up. We visit a different host's home each month and meet in all sorts of houses.

"Over the last few years I've made some good friends through it, including Phil, who's 90 and very lively. The drivers and hosts are lovely and it's so good of them to give up their Sunday for us. It's been so important for me - before

I joined the group six years ago I just watched TV, cried and lost weight."

Irene, who's 87, is part of the same Contact the Elderly group, one of four in Leeds. The charity is nationwide, but started in Yorkshire 37 years ago and has created 30 friendship groups across the region. It's the only charity dedicated solely to tackling loneliness and isolation among older people who live alone and may have lost many loved ones.

Through the Yorkshire groups' 475 volunteer hosts, drivers and co-ordinators, around 250 people each month who are mostly aged 75+ are able to meet and enjoy each other's company as well as becoming friends with those of different age groups who drive them and welcome them into their homes. Nationally there are 386 groups.

Irene met Eileen in the same group. After losing her husband Irene moved to Leeds nine years ago to live near a friend, having spent the first 81 years of her life on the Wirral. She had lost many of her friends and had no family nearby. After a couple of years in Yorkshire her old friend passed away, which was a bitter blow.

One day, on the access bus to the supermarket, a woman told her about Contact the Elderly. It's hard to imagine now, but she too says she was "not a good mixer" before she joined the monthly tea party. Her eyes sparkle when she talks about it.

"It sounds greedy, but I'd like it if it happened every day. I so look forward to it and the people are so warm and welcoming, as



FEELING AT HOME: Volunteer Bridget Kelly with Eileen, middle, and Irene; Trevor Lyttleton, a solicitor from Leeds who founded the charity Contact the Elderly; a tea party in progress in Sheffield hosted by Sarah Birch, pictured about to serve the cake.



MAIN PICTURE: GARY LONGBOTTOM

Yorkshire people generally are. When you've lost friends it can be so difficult to recover but after each get-together, I go home feeling happy and relaxed and it keeps me going."

Bridget Kelly, who's in her 50s, is a volunteer driver and co-ordinator. She has a family and full-time job in the finance department of Bradford City Council and first volunteered 14 years ago. As she explains, while it feels good to give something to others, the benefits are mutual.

"Both my parents died when I was quite young, and I really missed the link with that generation. They are so interesting and have all lived very different lives. I have grandchildren and love them to bits, but I also love the company of the elderly."

Above and beyond the call of her actual duties, she and her partner Sean host a Christmas dinner for any of the group who would otherwise be alone.

"I also enjoy seeing how being part of the group alters people like Eileen, who was so quiet at first and has really blossomed," says Bridget.

It may not be a visible problem, but more than 150,000 people in Yorkshire are aged 75 or more and live alone. Around 56,000 see relatives or friends less than once a week, and 6,000 never see or have visits from anyone they know.

Contact the Elderly reaches out into this population of isolated people in both rural and urban areas via other charities like Age UK as well as district nurses, GP

surgeries, various other agencies and sometimes makes contact via simple word of mouth.

Angie Griffin, who's self-employed and lives in Menston, near Ilkley, became a volunteer driver ten years ago and was completely taken by the simplicity of the tea party idea.

"You see people cheer up immediately. Some don't like being picked up in a mini-van and taken to a church hall for the day. They are more at ease in a homely setting in a small group, and the hosts are so very welcoming, making them feel part of the family. The drivers stay and join in and we all get to know each other very well."

Tim Beaumont, a self-employed consultant in sales who lives near Wetherby, got involved

eight years ago. "I volunteered as a reserve driver and have since become a group co-ordinator, which means I organise a group of up to nine members, four regular drivers, reserve drivers and hosts. I heard about the work of Contact the Elderly from its development officer in the north Mary Robinson. It sounded like something my mother would have enjoyed and the time commitment wasn't huge."

Tim and his wife Julie regularly host the tea party, although they're moving down south soon, to a rural area where he hopes to start a new group. "I love hearing 93-year-old Harry's stories about his Army days in India, and Gladys's tales of growing up in Morley and how people worked in the rhubarb fields and shoddy

factories. And then there's Mary, a retired primary school teacher who can tell me the Latin name of every plant and flower in the garden. They are just a wonderful group of people."

Contact the Elderly has thrived since Leeds-born solicitor Trevor Lyttleton started the charity in London in 1965. "I was an article clerk in Marylebone and I noticed a lot of lonely and frail-looking elderly people in the neighbourhood," says Trevor, who is still the charity's chairman.

"With the help of a list from the local authority we made contact with those who were on their own.

"Five years later we took it beyond London. I think part of the reason I started the charity was that I missed seeing my own grandmother in Leeds, and didn't like the idea of anyone being old and alone.

"We have tremendously loyal volunteers, but with younger people moving around so much these days it's becoming more difficult to find those who can commit a little of their time.

"Yet everyone involved gets so much benefit, and all that's needed apart from transport is a warm welcome, a large teapot and a downstairs loo."

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■ If you would like to volunteer as a driver, reserve driver, or as a host - or if you are lonely and would like to join a group - contact Mary Robinson 01535-632592, email contactmary@talktalk.net, www.contact-the-elderly.org.uk

THE TOLL OF LONELINESS

Loneliness is the "hidden killer" of elderly people, says a campaign group which recently called for greater recognition of the link between isolation and ill-health. The Campaign to End Loneliness, funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and supporting charities Independent Age and the UK Oxfordshire, Wansel and Care and the RVS, warned that lonely elderly people are increased risk of depression, lack of exercise and bad diet, as well as suffering from conditions of the immune and cardiovascular systems. A lack of social interaction has also been linked to the onset of Alzheimer's Disease. Campaigners are calling for loneliness to be recognised as a public health issue.