

## Shelley Chapman



Shelley lives in Putney with her husband and has three “grown up” children. She’s always been an active volunteer in one capacity or another, and recently joined a charity providing help and support for the elderly. She tells us what she enjoys about the volunteering, the important benefits she feels that she, and others, get out of volunteering, and how you can get involved in the charity with even just a couple of hours a months.

### TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR VOLUNTEERING

The charity that I volunteer for is called Re-engage (previously called Contact the Elderly). I joined early last year and you volunteer as either a driver or a host; I’m currently a driver. Many of the elderly people we support are not very mobile, so to become a driver you need a car big enough to seat one or two of them, and one that they can get in and out of easily. You then drive them to the house of whoever is hosting the tea. The tea usually takes place on a Sunday afternoon from 3pm to 5pm and there tends to be a dozen or so ladies (they tend to be ladies, there are very few men) who have a chinwag together, along with the host and the drivers, over sandwiches and cake. It’s really lovely and there is a lot of interaction.

There is a lot of chit chat about what’s going on and any problems they might have. A lot of these ladies don’t much have much family, either at all, or the family they do have don’t live locally, or they’re estranged from them for one reason or another. They’re usually over 75 and the range of what they’re like as people...well the spectrum is huge. Some are very lonely and a little down in the dumps, but some are very positive. The one thing they all have in common is that they’re all so grateful to have the support of the charity.

It’s quite an insight and it’s just such an easy thing to do. You give up a couple of hours one Sunday a month. It gives the ladies you support something to look forward to and some sort of contact. Over time you also build relationships, although you do have to be careful that they don’t become too dependent on you. Sometimes it takes a little bit of patience and tolerance (which is not a bad thing to work on as a “life skill”) and mostly it’s a very positive afternoon for everybody involved.

### HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN DOING IT FOR?

I’ve been doing it for about 18 months or so. I used to be on a local committee for Cancer Research UK many years ago, for a number of years. For a couple of reasons I moved away from that organisation, but remained active in other community groups in a more informal manner, I’ve always tried to do something to help others whether it’s been in an official role or just informally. My mother was a great role model in that respect, she used to host tea parties much like those I’m involved with now. She lives in the countryside in East Sussex and the ladies she invited to her tea parties would always swarm in and sit at tables, nattering away, and consuming lots of cake, sandwiches and cups of tea!



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#### HOW DID YOU FIND OUT ABOUT THE CHARITY?

I was getting the tube from Putney to Sloane Square and, waiting on the platform, there was an elderly lady looking very confused and unsure of where she was going. I asked her if I could help. She was trying to get to Victoria which was one stop after where I was going, so I chatted on the tube with her. She had been very unwell. She'd recovered, but she was coming to see a consultant. She'd moved from Putney to near Winchester with her husband a couple of years ago and then about 6 months after the move, her husband died. So she hardly knew anyone nearby. She had two daughters who were both estranged in some way so she couldn't turn to them for help and was quite alone.

Anyway, we had a nice chat and I explained to her what to do when she got off at Victoria, and to be honest I felt bad that I couldn't just go with her and get her to where she needed to be, but I had an appointment to get to. Her situation played on my mind, and I got home and thought there must be lots of other people like this, as unfortunate as that is. I looked up on the internet what charities existed for elderly people and came across what was then called "Contact the Elderly". I contacted them and that's how it started. I had to go to their head office which is in Victoria and have my police check and all that sort of stuff done, and then they put me in touch with the Putney volunteers. There is one main "organiser" for our area and then about eight to ten of us who alternate driving and hosting.

#### WHAT DO YOU FEEL THE PEOPLE YOU'RE SUPPORTING GET OUT OF IT?

I think for many of them it's an important contact, I think for some it's the only contact they get. You just assume everybody has lots of people around them and many don't. One of the ladies I have been contacting through Covid is Austrian, and she doesn't have any family, she's divorced with no children. She has a brother who lives in America and I don't think they speak, and her parents are obviously long gone. So, she really doesn't have anyone other than a few friends she would do things with in "normal" times.

She doesn't have the internet. She doesn't use a computer. She only has the basic TV channels, and she doesn't have a mobile phone. She doesn't want anything technological because, as she says, "If it goes wrong, I just get so stressed". It's such a shame as she's 84 and she's an intelligent woman, but a lot of the older generation are scared of technology, and of course it can be very expensive. So for a lot of the people that we see at the teas, and the people we've helped over lockdown, we're some of the only contact they have.

#### HOW HAS WHAT YOU'VE BEEN DOING BEEN AFFECTED OVER THE LAST FEW MONTHS?



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Each of the volunteers was allocated one or two ladies to keep in touch with on the phone. When the country was in total lockdown, we phoned our ladies once or twice a week. We did little food shops and picked up prescriptions. What became apparent was that it was the chatting on the telephone that they enjoyed the most. When you delivered some food to them, you'd knock on the door and have a "socially distanced" chat on the doorstep for ten minutes. That, I think, made a real difference.

They did have one of the first "post lockdown" tea parties in September in one of the hosts' gardens. Only six of them and it was a really lovely Sunday. I think now it's a question of giving them some confidence to get back out there a little, cautiously, but it's not doing anybody any good being stuck inside alone constantly and you try to imagine how you'd feel. We are lucky to have all this interaction with many different people, but for some of them it's a very solitary life.

## WHAT KIND OF PERSON DO YOU THINK THIS WOULD BE SUITABLE FOR?

I think you need to have the ability to be able to chat about nothing, to keep thinking of topics of conversation to keep them engaged. You just need to be warm and friendly really and engaged, listen to them, and having a sense of humour is very important. You don't need any specific qualifications, but some of the softer skills around communication, and some enthusiasm! It doesn't require a lot of time so even busy people would be able to make a difference.

## HOW DO YOU FEEL BEING INVOLVED BENEFITS YOUR LIFE AND THE LIVES OF OTHERS?

It makes me feel as though I have done something useful and it gives me a sense of purpose. Being a mother is obviously very enjoyable, but it is nice to do something outside of your own family. What it also does, which I hope will have a knock-on effect, is it gives my children (who are all grown up now) an example of community. About how we shouldn't just think of ourselves. As I said earlier, my mother used to do it. I witnessed that and that sense of community really sunk in for me.

I do think it's important in the world we now live in, which is becoming more and more insular because of social media – we're lacking in face to face contact. So, I think it's important for the children to see people helping others, and to hear me talking about it. Hopefully they'll do something themselves, or feel the inclination to do something – but they're all working now and it's a bit stressful when you're working. A lot of this is to do with having empathy though, and that doesn't necessarily come naturally to everyone. I think sometimes you have to see things happening first-hand to realise how important it is to help. And actually, it's a two-way street. Because you do it and you feel as though you have done something



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positive. And when people ask what you do and you say "I do a little bit of charity work", people think "Oh that's nice" and it's nice for your own wellbeing!

It is rewarding to feel that you're giving something back, and getting to know someone who has had a completely different life to you and your family. I find it quite fascinating to think about what it must've been like for them, as a young person. We can sometimes have a tendency to look at elderly people and just think of them as "an old person" but that's what is nice about doing this, you see the same group over a period of time, you get to know them and hear about what they're interested in. Some of them are very switched on, they all have a story to tell and some of them have REAL passion. And I think that's key in life, to have a passion and to try and keep it going.

Many people could make a difference by looking just beyond their own doorstep. We started a WhatsApp group for our street which includes a couple of elderly people. We've lived on our street for over 20 years and I didn't know some of my neighbours, other than by sight, and a lot of people you wouldn't have known what their situation is. It was great how people stepped up and helped those that needed help. Often you don't have to look very far to find people in need, and it can be more effective if you offer help informally. That is one of the benefits of this year; more people working from home. Many people have found the time and opportunity to get to know their local community a bit more, and help others, which is lovely.

### HOW MIGHT SOMEONE FIND OUT ABOUT THIS OPPORTUNITY?

Their website is: <https://www.reengage.org.uk/>

If you're interested in volunteering it's self-explanatory. You need a clean driving licence to be a driver and they will run a DBS check on you. You go along for a chat, a type of interview, but it's very friendly and informal. They are all over the country, and obviously with London being a densely populated area there are multiple groups.

Equally – if you know of someone, perhaps someone local to you on your street, who you think might benefit from help from Reengage perhaps think about speaking to them about it. One drawback of the charity is that it's mostly accessed online – so elderly people without access to the internet might not be aware of how they can get help. So please do think about mentioning it and offering to sign them up for more information.



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