

Chatting like old buddies

I was born in the Caribbean. I came to the UK when I was nine, and culture shock doesn't describe it, but it's given me a way to deal with certain things. I trained as a nurse here in the UK and I lived in Germany for seven years.

When I came back from Germany I completed further training, and then I started to work in the community because I didn't particularly like hospitals. So that's where I spent most of my nursing career, in the community, with people. I learned a lot from people, and I'm hoping they learned a little bit from me too.

I really enjoyed that part of my career. Unfortunately, my mother got poorly and I retired at the age of 62 to care for her. When I could I travelled, that's my passion. I love travelling, and so I went to the US and Canada, some islands in the Caribbean and parts of Europe. It was great to experience other traditions and cultures and meet different people.

Covid put a stop to my travelling really, and also my health deteriorated quite quickly, and suddenly I became much less mobile, having to use crutches and unable to drive my car. Digging a hole and hiding under a blanket isn't how I deal with things, so I reached out to Age UK Oxfordshire for help. I wanted to find out how I could make things easier for me and how I could stay independent. I'd say I'm brutally independent!

Anyway, I had a visit from someone who came to help me with a form to access some entitlements which could pay for some practical things to make life easier. She came and spent time with me and at the end she explained to me about Phone Friends. She wanted to know if I'd be interested in volunteering! I enjoy my own company, I don't have any issues with that at all. I'm alone, but I'm not lonely. I never get bored because I love reading and watching things on TV. But it was actually a really opportune time because I was feeling, not useless, but of less use.

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I thought well I'm not really one for small talk, but there's a lot I can learn from other people and I'm skilled at listening, and I think I'm quite skilled at hearing what people aren't saying too. And so really it just felt like the right thing to do, like something I'd been silently wishing or hoping for. And I thought well it's a way of giving back. She explained it all to me and I jumped at it and at the moment I have three people who I phone each week.

It's strange at first because you don't know this person. But the idea is to get to know them. You get a little synopsis of who they are, you know, next of kin, interests, that sort of thing. What I always think is there are many differences between us, but there's a lot more similarities. At the end of the day, people are people. I always remember what my grandmother used to say, “You know people are like books, unless you open it and read it you will never get to know it. You can't understand it just by looking at the cover.”

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I phone two gentlemen on a Wednesday and a lady on a Thursday. I think something in the universe connected me with the lady I speak to because she has a memory issue and the first time I spoke to her it brought back so many of the things I did and said and listened to with my own mum. My mum had dementia and she died a few years ago. She was my hero in so many ways and part of me feels like, did I do enough for her? Although I retired to support her, she did move into a care home, and that’s an alien concept to me, in my culture, but there was no other way. My Phone Friend reminds me of all things I supported my mum with, and I feel like I have a chance to really give something. My experiences of my mum feeling impatient and frustrated really help me and I know how to deftly change the conversation to something this lady can remember.

One of the men I speak to sometimes just wants to talk, and then another time he’ll say “Joyce, I’ve been chatting all the time! What have you been doing? How have you been?” and that sort of thing.

I didn’t get to talk to him last Wednesday and I was anxious because it said his number wasn’t working. The next day I phoned the Phone Friends people and said you know, I’m a little bit concerned. She was really helpful. She said not to worry about it, and she got back to me the next day – all was fine and he had a new number!

The other man I call is on his own and we have some really healthy discussions about the world and politics and things. We’d never get the chance to talk to each other in the outside world, so I find that quite an interesting opportunity. He never hangs up until he’s told me a joke!

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Everyone’s very different, and that to me is the crux of the whole thing. I get to talk to and learn from people living really different lives. And I can give them something too. It brings to me a sense of using the talents and skills that I was given, talents I had been using, and still can use! I like the fact that there’s a sense of anonymity with Phone Friends - we can’t see each other so we can only imagine – I say “Just call me Joyce”. But it’s like chatting with old buddies “Oh, hi Joyce, how are you?” We both benefit. People have always interested me, and I really and truly enjoy being a Phone Friend.

To find out more or to sign up to be a telephone befriender then please call

01295 234 850 or visit

www.ageuk.org.uk/oxfordshire/get-involved/volunteer/telephone-befriending-volunteer/