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REACHING OUT TO ELLENOR FAMILIES IN TIMES OF NEED

The tireless work of family support workers at our hospice has never been more paramount. Families dealing with demanding caring roles, life-limiting illness and bereavement now also have to contend with the isolation caused by Covid.

Keeping in touch has been a challenging task for Rebecca Richardson and her colleagues. But, out of the pressures brought by the pandemic, they have seen the indomitable human spirit emerge. Groups who used to meet face to face have started to reach out to each other in other ways. Many call each other, meet on Zoom calls, some have set up WhatsApp groups and others

meet in pairs for walks as part of their daily exercise. Some met in small groups of 6 when that was allowed last year.

Our bereavement service

Before Covid, family support workers were running three Bereavement Cuppas, weekly at the Glentworth Ex-Service Club in Dartford and at our hospice in Northfleet, and monthly in Swanley.

Rebecca said: “They met for support, a cup of tea and a chat, to make new friends who could understand what they were going through and to support each other through a very difficult period in their lives. Supporting them while they readjust to life without their loved ones is a real privilege. Working with and supporting those bereaved is such a rewarding part of my job.”

The pandemic put a sudden stop to these get-togethers last spring and since then Rebecca, fellow family support worker Terrie May and a team of our volunteers have been regularly phoning group members and those more recently bereaved to offer support and ask how they are coping with lockdown life.

Rebecca said: “We knew they were already dealing with a very difficult period in their lives and that the isolation of the pandemic could just make things so much worse for them.

“It’s great to know that both the Dartford bereavement group and the hospice group have now set up WhatsApp groups between themselves, where they can text each other and just say ‘good morning’ and ‘I hope you are having a good day’. This sort of contact is so important especially for people on their own, especially if they are grieving.”

Bereavement group meetings of up to 15 are now allowed, so we trialed a get-together at the hospice the Sunday between Christmas and New Year. We have also had sessions at the end of January and February, and in March.

“As more people are getting their vaccinations, they are becoming more confident about the idea of socialising again,” Many are saying they can’t wait to get back to the Cuppas when they feel safe to do so” said Rebecca.

Before Covid, she and Linda Rush, a volunteer also set up a successful twice-monthly walk and talk group for bereaved family members in Gravesend, run by Linda and other volunteers. Some members now meet in pairs for their daily exercise and are supported with a regular call by a volunteer. Rebecca hopes that once restrictions are lifted, ellenor will be able to set up more of these groups.

Support for carers

The Carers Cuppa held fortnightly on a Saturday morning at the hospice has been on hold during the pandemic, but Rebecca has been amazed by the support network members have set up.

She said: “Sue Gray, a long-term **ellenor** volunteer, has been a huge help, making regular calls to members of the group, and they all now meet for a Messenger video call once a fortnight. They have all managed really well.”

It was Rebecca’s own role as a carer for her father that inspired her to join the hospice.

She said: “I used to work with children at Southampton General Hospital, but in 2012 I took a sabbatical to go to Wales and look after my Dad and support my mum.”

Following her father’s death, Rebecca moved to Kent and became a healthcare assistant working here, later moving into her current role.

She said: “Before being a carer for my Dad I would have said absolutely ‘no’ to a job in palliative care. Looking after him was a real-life changer for me. Being able to support people and knowing you have made a difference during the most difficult time of their lives is so rewarding.”

A friend in need

In the past, volunteer befrienders would visit patients, carers and the bereaved in their homes, but again, this sort of contact is now mostly limited to phone and video calls.

Rebecca said: “The latest Covid guidelines do allow some face-to-face contact again and we have plans to start some of these visits again for those we are able to. I think people understand that when someone is completely isolated,

particularly if they are bereaved or struggling with their health, they are essential users and may need one-to-one support.”

As well as the difficulties faced by patients and carers, Rebecca is very aware of the pressures our volunteers are under.

“Without them we wouldn’t be able to offer the services we do, we have a monthly Zoom call and I have been keeping in regular contact with them to make sure they are coping okay,” she said.

“As well as dealing with their own hardships and tragedies brought about by Covid, they are reaching out and offering support to others.

“The volunteers have been amazing and I’m so grateful to them. They give their time to us and they work as hard as we do. They all need medals.”

We are **ellenor**, a charity funded by the generosity of our local community, offering the best care and support to families facing terminal illness in Kent. We are the **only** charity in the county that provides hospice care for people of all ages – babies, children and adults - and their families. This includes pain and symptom relief, end of life care, respite, bereavement support and emotional and spiritual care.

Our Children’s Hospice Care, formerly known as chYps, is provided in the comfort of the family home and spans across North and West Kent and the London Borough of Bexley. Adults living in Gravesham, Dartford and Swanley, receive care in their place of choice, including their own homes, at our Hospice in Gravesend and in local care homes.

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