

I'm Susan, I'm 58 years old. I came back from Canada about four years ago now. I'm a British resident but I was living and working overseas, working in therapies, cancer care and paraplegic care.

I came back to England because I had cancer myself. When I was recuperating, I got into work here but found that I couldn't compete with work and so had to make the decision to rethink my future. I decided I was to rehabilitate myself through my art as an artist. I just got carried away with it and realised that people like my work. I remember people at the hospital said things like, "Why aren't you doing more of it?"

I guess I had to practice what I preached as a therapist. It really paid off. It brought me through a lot of dark times and a lot of lonely spells, especially with dilemmas with my care in cancer. It really brought me through a very dark tunnel.

There was always somebody there with Cancer Research UK or Macmillan. I found it didn't matter what dire straits I was in, they were always there. There was somebody there that I could talk to.

When I got back on my feet and things sort of settled in my life, I began to admire a lot of the older people around me and listened to a lot of local stories about loneliness around here. After seeing and feeling it myself, I was thinking that there must be a solution to this. Why can't we just talk to one another? A lot of the time, that's all people really need, just a conversation. So, I decided to volunteer for Age UK.

Becoming a befriender and meeting Sylvia

Lovely Jules came around to meet me, introduced himself and told me about the charity. I thought, "yeah, that's what I want to do!" I specifically wanted to concentrate on people away from the city who were out in the countryside. I felt these people were pretty much forgotten and were further away from their amenities. I said I had a car, was able to travel and would like to go and see someone out in the sticks. Jules fixed it up, and I met Sylvia.

He said that he thought we'd have some things in common because she's an artist too. We were introduced initially by telephone, which was a little daunting speaking to a complete stranger. But the language of art was there and we just hit it off. I then planned regular phone calls with her maybe once a week.

As I was down on the coast here in Dorset, I used to make a point of calling from the seaside. I'd sit in my car, look out to sea and I'd call her and tell her where I was and describe the scene in front of me. She was just in awe and the memories just came flooding back to her of her being at the beach and her having her visits around the world. Well, five minutes turned to ten minutes, ten minutes went to an hour – we just kept talking and talking!

She wanted to see some of my artwork which was the topic of conversation. As COVID set in, I couldn't go and see her, so I started to describe my work to her over the phone as she didn't have the internet. It was hard describing my pictures over the

phone, but Sylvia got it straight away. When COVID settled down a little bit, I got the chance to go and visit her. I took some of my paintings and we sat on the bench outside and talked, had a cup of tea. It was lovely, it was a day out for me. I was there for maybe one or two hours.

The lady is a book of knowledge and we compare notes! She's been all over the world and so have I. I was born in North Africa at Tripoli and I'm from an ex-military background. I worked alongside the Dalai Lama with the Tibetan nuns, and the stories just go on and on. I've got a lot to tell her. At the end of those visits, I said, "right, back to reality. I better get to Aldi and get my bread and milk!"

You're able to disappear just for little while into each other's past, and I think that's really important at times like this. The world does seem very different right now for everybody and we're all kind of pushed into this foggy little atmosphere that we've got to make a go of. You've just go to think about the past, think about your happy times and just keep pulling them forward.

The impact of coronavirus

When I'm talking to Sylvia during this crisis and lockdown, I talk about what I know and have heard. I try not to listen to the news too much as it can be really scary. But, on the other hand, the news is all a lot of older people have. So, I try to take a very neutral view and keep things positive. Sylvia has been through a war, she's been through worse than this and has come out the other side, so we can get through this too.

The constant media coverage doesn't help at times, in a lot of cases, it instils a lot of fear. We're told that older people are more susceptible to it, and are more likely to die from it. It's easier for us younger ones. It's up to us to keep pulling them on. Without them, we wouldn't be here.

I also think it's there's a lot to be learned from the from Eastern families. A 'typical British' family is mom, dad, two kids, cat and a dog. Grandma and Grandpa live in another house and get older and older. Eventually, they might go into a nursing home. They are always segregated from the family unit.

With Eastern families, Grandma and Grandpa live in the house. They live their golden years together. I think that's the problem in our society. Older people are seen and approached as something separate from us. We need to be pulling them in more. If I could turn back time, I'd have moved grandma into my house and maybe would have built an annex for her.

People should just give volunteering a go. Volunteering has been a lifesaver for me. It's kept me focused and it's kept me on my direction. I'm just glad that it's there. Sylvia has just become part of me now, it's wonderful.

What loneliness means to me

The times where I've experienced loneliness, I felt very cold, very abandoned, very isolated. It can feel like a task just picking up the phone and talking to somebody. Although it could feel quite warm and safe in your protective shell, it's so lonely and

you have to break out of that. This can be really difficult and frightening for a lot of people.

I've had my fair share of dark spells, but I guess, with my foresight, I've been able to know that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Some people just can't see that light, and they need a bit of steering or a bit of coaching, and I think that's really important. When you're in those dark times, you might not realise that life is precious, but when you get through the other end, you see things really differently.