

YOPEY Befrienders: the teenage volunteers at care homes

Young People of the Year is a charity helping sixth form students volunteer at their local care home. In this article, Tony Gearing, founder of the charity, explains what these teenagers are doing to improve the quality of life for people living with dementia

Young People of the Year (YOPEY) is a charity that lets young people, known as YOPEY Befrienders, give back, and help those in care. YOPEY Befrienders are teenage volunteers, usually students in their first year of sixth form, who visit care homes and spend time with residents, drinking tea, listening to stories, and improving the quality of life for the residents they befriend.

Why put residents and teenagers together?

There are several reasons why this arrangement works, and some are more obvious than others. First, older people in care homes often do not get enough visits from their relatives, and can easily become isolated or feel neglected. We have found that young people in particular—even ones they are not related to—lift their spirits. A more subtle reason, though just as important, is that in spending time with those in care, our YOPEY Befrienders come to understand the role of care homes and nursing homes, and their place in society. This is very much a mutually beneficial arrangement, for the residents, the home and the teenage volunteers.

Image problems

I started YOPEY Befrienders to give young people the opportunity to do some good volunteering in their community and get some positive press. It also helps care homes get the same positive press, and naturally leads to happier residents and families. For several years, care homes have faced something of an image problem, with the mainstream media focusing on the negative aspects of the industry (Howard, 2013). This public image problem is something that teenagers can fundamentally identify with, simply due to their age and the way they are perceived by the media.

Despite these image problems, our young volunteers cannot help but come to understand the true role of care homes and nursing homes. The more knowledge that is learned about care and dementia can only be good for all of us.

How does YOPEY Befriender work?

When a care home approaches YOPEY, looking to join the scheme, I visit the local secondary schools near the home and give an assembly. This usually gets anywhere up to 66% of the young people in the room wanting to be YOPEY Befrienders. If, as is often the case, more volunteer than we have spaces for at the care home, the school whittles the volunteers down to those it feels will be the most reliable.

YOPEY then takes them to the care home, where training is provided, either using our own trainers or a member of the home's staff. It is important that this training is hard-edged—it is important that young people should know what can happen with people with dementia, even though, hopefully, no adverse incident ever happens to them. It is important that the young people are encouraged to raise any concerns they may have, and never leave the care home unhappy.

Once the training is complete, the Befriender will likely spend their first few visits chatting to residents over a cup of tea; but by the end of the scheme, the Befrienders are putting on events and doing life stories on their favourite friends. In-between they will join activities, from arts and crafts to singing and bingo calling. Everyone can read to residents and put together music playlists. In my opinion, there is no sight more touching than a teenager and an 80-year-old listening to the same music and sharing headphones, one earpiece each. Girls—but by no means only girls—have also been seen painting the nails of the residents. If a resident does not want to talk, the Befriender may simply hold their hand.

We typically recruit and train 20–30 volunteers for care homes with 50–80 residents, and support them in visiting

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The young people tend to form genuine friendships, giving rise to opportunities for life stories

the care homes for an hour a week, for a year. By the time one group of young people is coming to the end of their year, we are recruiting their successors.

While the volunteers are provided a certificate for every 10 hours they spend as a Befriender, the young people get more than just a piece of paper out of volunteering. Three

of our volunteers have written about their experiences in the case studies below.

Case studies

Humaira Ali, 18

Last year, Mr Gearing visited my school, and informed us about the YOPEY Befriender scheme taking place at a care home not a mile from our school's gates. I was lucky enough to be chosen for the scheme. We went in groups to the home to be trained and introduced to the residents. The training lasted about two hours and I was left in no doubt that being a YOPEY Befriender was going to be a challenge, but very satisfying if I showed 'stickability' and stayed the course.

This has indeed paid off as I have managed just that—going to the care home for at least an hour a week, almost every week since the start of this year. When I am there, I talk to different residents, tell them about my day and ask about theirs. I may end up having a cup of tea with whoever wants a chat on that day. The hour flies by and it is soon time for me to leave, but I always look forward to going back the next week.

Payam Soleimani, 18

My experience with dementia did not begin last year when I became a YOPEY Befriender, but around a decade ago when my grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. At the time, he was around 80 years old, and only my aunt and uncle lived in the same country as him. With families and responsibilities of their own, they struggled to balance their normal daily life with the huge spike in care that my grandfather now needed.

When I was younger, I did not really understand what was going on, but as I began to grow up I understood more about the disease and how it works. When I heard about the YOPEY Befriender scheme, I knew it was something I needed to do. The process of applying was very quick, and YOPEY provided me with all the relevant training and information to get volunteering as soon as possible. I walk to the care home during free lessons at school and spend an hour with the residents. The initial purpose of my visit was to brighten their day, but as I began visiting more and more, I soon came to realise that when I talk to the residents, they brighten mine.

While the scheme is extremely beneficial for the residents, I believe it is just as beneficial for the young people as well. I am aspiring to become a medical student, and the experiences I have had, and the skills that I have learnt, will be invaluable to my career. From communication to situation-handling techniques, I have become more aware of the needs of patients with such a damaging disease and I am confident my peers have too.

Alliah Qadeer, 18

I volunteered to become a YOPEY Befriender for self-interested reasons—I want to work in the health care



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sector as a doctor, and straight away I knew volunteering at a care home with people with dementia would look good on my medical school application. But this has become so much more than just a 'tick in a box', as I have had, and learned from, amazing experiences at the care home.

Prior to my first visit to the care home I was incredibly apprehensive, as I was unsure how the residents would conduct themselves. However, this was covered in the introductory training. It was stressed that if I was ever affected by anything I saw, heard or was involved in at the home, I should tell the staff immediately. Dementia can give rise to some unusual behaviours and it is important that I, as a volunteer, should not worry about them.

The vast majority of residents at the home suffer from Alzheimer's and other dementia diseases. You visit one day and give them your name but when you see them next they would have forgotten. But it is still worth having conversations with them. I have also joined in many activities, such as playing games, making arts and crafts, and taking part in quizzes.

Happiness is found in serving others. Although you may think it is your residents receiving our visits that benefit the most, I think it is the other way around.

Conclusion

YOPEY Befriender started in two care homes visited by three schools in 2013. We now work with 10 care homes and nursing homes, and one day centre, visited by 10

Key points

- Under the YOPEY Befriender scheme, teenagers volunteer to visit nursing and residential care homes to befriend residents
- Many of the residents that the Befrienders work with have dementia, so training is provided to the volunteers on how to cope and interact with challenging residents
- Both teenagers and the care homes receive positive publicity by taking part in the scheme
- The YOPEY Befrienders scheme is growing as more care homes want to take part

schools, and receive frequent requests to set up new schemes. Hundreds of sixth-formers have taken part, and we are now trialling YOPEY Befriender schemes with younger teenagers. **NRC**

For more information about the charity YOPEY, please visit: www.youngpeopleoftheyear.org

Howard R (2013) Care homes suffering from image problem, as media focuses on negative dementia statistics. <http://bit.ly/2eCwNy> (accessed 25 October 2016)

