

Befriending Case Studies: A Glimpse into Other People's Matches



Befriend in Bellshill Christmas Party, December 2009

There is no such thing as a typical befriending project and no such thing as a typical match. Each one is different and each person involved brings a different set of lifeskills into each other's lives. What often starts off with a simple application form or referral takes many befrienders and clients on journeys neither could ever foresee.

According to Brian Smith, Befriending Co-ordinator of Befriend in Bellshill, "This couldn't be more true - I've got a couple of matches here that spring immediately to mind. Take Tessa, for instance, a retired sheltered housing warden and trained nurse who we matched with Elizabeth, a 75-year-old lady hoping a befriender might be able to offer her support.

Both of these ladies came to our attention within weeks of each other. On paper, they seemed to be a good match with some background interests in common. Once we had decided that this had the potential to be a feasible match, we met each lady separately. When we were only part way through describing Tessa to Elizabeth, she realised they had been nursing colleagues in the past but hadn't seen each other since 1956!

I'm sure you'll understand when I say that it was a very unusual introduction when these two ladies met. Instead of a nervous but polite handshake, there was much hugging and some tears.

A very different example is Christine and Ian, a 74-year-old man referred to Befriend in Bellshill after the death of his wife. Christine had an amazing ability to make deep contact with Ian and was even able to lift his mood noticeably - his conversation was more diverse and he developed interest in other things again.

This wonderful match lasted for two-and-a-half years until Ian died quite recently. During the final stages of Ian's illness, Christine was his main (and sometimes only) hospital visitor. During Ian's final decline, the hospital sent for Christine, who sat with him and held his hand as he passed away. This is far beyond the call of duty for any befriender, but a real indication of Christine's character and the depth of the relationship which she developed with this elderly man.

What's striking to me is how it is not always client's lives that take a turn for the unexpected. We've got

one befriender, Sheila who is matched with Audrey, an older lady who was very keen to have someone in her life who wasn't paid to be there, someone who would also really have time to sit down and talk and were doing it because they had chosen to be there.

Sheila is a lovely, extrovert lady with a lifetime in the hotel and service sector which has led to a million stories which she revels in telling. However, the future of her match is at present uncertain as she has recently been diagnosed as having the early signs of Alzheimer's. Sheila is very open about her condition and typically, she continues to use her abilities, including those of a befriender, to the full.

We are, of course, committed to supporting Sheila and Audrey's relationship for as long as possible by keeping a dialogue open between us all so that we know what's happening. It is tempting sometimes to feel very sad for Sheila, but she herself is so positive that we don't. Her courage, and commitment, really is an inspiration.

Brian Smith is Befriending Co-ordinator for BeFriend in Bellshill, a befriending project working with older people