

SVP tackling loneliness for Brighton's elderly

Anita Boniface

Isolation is becoming a growing problem in Britain today, particularly for older people. Children often grow up and move away with their work, friends pass away, and an older person can find themselves living alone with no one to visit or take them out.

That's why the Christian charity St Vincent de Paul Society (SVP) set up a community centre for older people in Brighton.

The centre, called Tower House, is now in its second year and runs a memory café, activity groups, and provides lunches to its guests, mostly people with cognitive decline, and their carers.

SVP volunteers Peter Cropp and his wife Jo have several decades worth of voluntary experience between them and were influential in the establishment of the centre.

Peter explains: "I have been an SVP member for almost 60 years, and as with all SVP members we visit people in their homes, offering friendship and support.

"With so many people we visited needing companionship and being stuck at home, too frail to go out, we thought why not establish a centre where people can come together

and talk and make friends."

Jo says: "Tower House Community Centre allows the people we visit as SVP members to meet one another face to face.

"They often swap phone numbers and friendships are borne. Sometimes we get referrals from agencies, and other times from hospital discharge teams. We, and other members who live locally, visit the person who has been referred, and invite them to Tower House where we feel they might benefit from what it has to offer."

Doreen, an older lady with memory decline, and her daughter and carer Karen, have recently started coming to Tower House to enjoy the activities.

Doreen says: "I love talking to other people, and I enjoy sharing interests with them."

A former professional designer with a creative streak, Doreen tells me: "I enjoyed the painting group" hosted by Tower House,

Sarah King is SVP projects assistant at Tower House. On Tuesday, 4th June, Sarah, together with other Tower House staff organised a special day in celebration of their volunteers.

Sarah says: "Our volunteers are in-

credible. They have the special skills and qualities of compassion and listening which helps them deal with guests who come to the Memory Café.

"As the focus is conversation, the volunteers will sit down together with guests, and encourage them to have a chat, picking up on sentences, to jog their memories where they may have lost the thread.

"It's a very special quality of care, and allows people to feel connected."

Frances is one of the volunteers at Tower House. She says: "Because I'm older too, it's nice to be able to relate to many of the memories our guests chat about. Brighton used to have a dance hall where I would often spend an evening. It's lovely to reminisce with our guests about their similar experiences and allow them to relive happy memories that haven't faded."

Elizabeth is another volunteer at Tower House. She says that she is less busy than she used to be, and enjoys volunteering every fortnight because it gives her time some structure.

Elizabeth says: "I really look forward to coming here and meeting the guests. It's so meaningful. Many of the guests may have memory



Tower House guest Doreen with her daughter and carer Karen

problems. They forget our names, but you can tell by the way they smile that they recognise us."

As well as the volunteers at Tower House, the SVP also depends on volunteers for the St Vincent's Community Shop on Lewis Road.

Katrine is a volunteer at the Community Shop and says: "I had to give up my healthcare job because of my own health problems. I really wanted to volunteer in a shop, and St Vincent's appealed. Not only had I learnt about St Vincent de Paul, Patron Saint of the poor, at school in

France, but I also felt the St Vincent's shop was most ethical because it was more affordable, and because the staff were very inclusive and welcoming."

Caroline also volunteers at St Vincent's Community shop and says: "By volunteering I feel part of the community. I'm 67 and retired, so it allows me to keep my skills and alertness up to scratch. I love chatting to the customers and it's very rewarding."

Anita Boniface is senior media and communications officer at the SVP.

The Brighton Tower House Support Centre, and St Vincent's Community shop, are both run by the SVP. To find out more or become a volunteer, visit www.svp.org.uk, contact Tower House directly 01273 549 604 or email info@svp.org.uk

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