

Time To Get Talking This Christmas

Caroline Billington is on a mission to get us all chatting to each other - especially at the most festive time of year. Here, she speaks to Sue Thomas about how she's changing lives

As Caroline Billington drove a minibus full of elderly people to a festive lunch, she couldn't help but pick up on the awkward silence.

However, it wasn't that these people were strangers.

They were neighbours and lived just yards from each other in the same block of flats.

Yet, despite their close living quarters, none of them knew each other or had even had a conversation.

It was 2007 and Caroline had volunteered to drive a minibus of elderly people to a locally organised Christmas Day lunch in Newbury.

'On the way there, nobody spoke, we just travelled in silence,' Caroline says.

It was so strange, as these people were neighbours. But on the way back, I noticed a

'On the way back from the lunch, they were chatting non-stop'

stark change. They were chatting non-stop and arranging to meet for coffee.

'They spoke about what a lovely time they'd had and how happy they were that they'd met each other.'

Caroline was so surprised at how a single lunch had brought everyone out of their shells.

It had given the group the chance to connect, talk and build budding friendships. And it was that moment

that gave Caroline an idea that changed her life.

'Rather than leave the good deed done, I started setting up a charity called Community Christmas,' Caroline says.

'I just had the urge to connect people. So I built a charity that offers support to anyone wanting to start a new Christmas Day event, with advice on how to gather volunteers for cooking, serving food and transporting people there and home again.'

And so the website, communitychristmas.org.uk, was born, listing places people can go on Christmas Day.

Over the next few years, the organisation continued to

grow, bringing elderly people together at 74 events across the country in 2013 and 152 in 2014. By 2015, it had risen to more than 300 events.

It was, and still remains, Caroline's mission to unite elderly people at Christmas so that nobody has to spend the festivities alone.

But the 56-year-old didn't want to stop there.

She wanted to connect people of all ages.



'I thought that those who are new to an area, women who've just had a baby or people who don't get out much might welcome the chance to meet someone and chat over a cuppa,' Caroline explains.

So in July 2016, she decided to launch Coffee Companions (coffeecompanions.co.uk), which encourages cafes to host regular coffee mornings, where people can meet and chat.

'It was a hit and was really lovely to see people connecting over a coffee,' Caroline recalls. 'Participants can even download a "Chat mat" from the website, which can be left on the table as an indicator that they're happy to natter. It just helps to eliminate any awkwardness.'

'At one session, one regular dug out a poem to share called

Warning: When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple.

'The following week, someone else from the group came along dressed head to toe in purple! It was a great icebreaker.'

So where did this passion for connecting people come from? Has Caroline, perhaps, felt isolated in her own life?

Quite the opposite, in fact.

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Caroline, third from right, set up Coffee Companions to help prevent people from feeling lonely



Caroline has an impressive and varied work history that has been very fulfilling.

She's been a speech therapist, an accountant and a finance director over the course of her working life.

'I live with my partner of 11 years and we don't have children - we never wanted them,' Caroline explains.



'I swim first thing every morning when I can, and try to learn one new thing every year.'

'This year, because my handwriting is appalling, I went on a calligraphy course, but I lost patience with it. However, I took up the trombone 15 years ago and still enjoy playing.'

Busy Caroline has also tried skateboarding, painting and volunteering at a local theatre.

And she continues to drive the local community minibus a few evenings a month.

'I'm not ready to stop yet,' Caroline says. 'I love bringing people together and helping them make new friends.'

Is trying to connect the world too big of a job for just one woman, though?

'Maybe,' Caroline admits. 'But even if I can only make a difference to a few people's lives, it's worth all the effort.'

Other Ways To Get Connected

The 'Frazzled Cafe'

M&S has joined forces with comedian Ruby Wax to launch fortnightly after-hours 'talk-in' sessions in selected stores. Under the banner Frazzled Cafe, people who are feeling 'frazzled' can meet to talk and share personal stories in a safe, non-judgemental and supportive environment.

The meetings are designed, not just for the one-in-four Britons suffering from mental-health illnesses, but for the four-in-four who are feeling harried and overwhelmed by the stresses of modern life.

♣ For more info, check out frazzledcafe.org



Men's Sheds

Men's Sheds supports mature men who want to get together to socialise. They can meet new friends, while making and mending items, sharing skills and learning new ones, all in the welcoming space of a 'shed' - or any form of workshop.

♣ To find out more, go to menssheds.org.uk





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