

Seniors Helping Seniors – a customer viewpoint/case study

I first became aware of Seniors Helping Seniors (SHS) through a brochure provided by a dementia outreach unit based at Age UK, Canterbury. I was exploring options for care for my mother (Louise) then aged 89 who had had dementia for about 8 years. Her dementia was presenting mainly as severe short-term memory loss – she still had (and continues to have) all her former charming personality and social skills – but moments of disorientation were increasing and we needed to do something to help keep mum safe. Louise (henceforth “Louise”, “mum” or “mother”) was still living at home by herself at the time, having lost her husband a few years earlier. She was coping reasonably well and was adamant that she did not want any nursing support or to go into a home – but did have lunch time meals delivered 3 times a week and enjoyed visits to the Age UK day centre on 3 other days. My two sisters and I and other close family members were providing support but, with us children all in full time jobs and living away from Canterbury, Louise still had long periods on her own - and lack of social contact could seem to trigger disorientation. Disorientation mainly took the form of being convinced the house where she had lived for some 60 years was not where she should be and she longed for her childhood home (in a different East Kent town) and could not understand how she had “arrived” where she was. It was after one or two more worrying incidents when mum was found wandering and looking lost in the street that I rang the dementia outreach team and picked up some information on support options, including the SHS brochure.

Among the wealth of literature available, I was attracted to the SHS brochure for several reasons. Like many of her generation Louise has always prided herself on her self-reliance and was, as I have said, very resistant to nursing support – even when she was caring at home for her bed-confined husband in his last days she wanted to do it all without help. She was adamant about not wanting to go for residential care – so some kind of support at home was needed. Moreover, I needed to pass off Louise’s carers as “other retired ladies on their own, popping in for a chat” or as “friendly neighbours”. This would not work if there were uniforms involved or a large age difference. The generally more senior staff working for SHS was thus ideal and there were no uniforms in sight in the brochure! They also provided the companionship care we were looking for and had staff very experienced with dementia sufferers.

We were nervous to take the plunge – wanting to get the right balance of independence and care for mum - and contacted the manager of SHS Canterbury for more information and initial enquiries on several occasions in early 2014. He took great pains to understand my mother’s situation and the family concerns and did not press for any commitment, giving us time and information to decide. From information I provided he identified SHS carers that would be suitable and we discussed at length the best way to introduce Louise to one of them – a lady retiree from a caring profession (and shall we say between my age - I am Louise’s son - and mums!) in a trial run. It was decided that the manager and carer would visit mum while I was present – and that apart from a few formal necessities, I would take care of explaining the reasons for the visit (emphasising the “another lady who is on her own and wants some company” angle). The visit duly took place and, although Louise was somewhat surprised and bemused – the success was evident from later visits when – from mum’s beaming smile - she was evidently very pleased to see her “new friend”.

From that point we have not looked back. SHS have helped us wonderfully on very many levels as we have, in stages, increased their visits as needed, and have been a constant and utterly reliable support through the gradual worsening of Louise’s dementia and eventual move into residential care. The support has also been extremely adaptable and flexible – responding very quickly indeed to changes of circumstances and going the “extra mile” in the case of occasional crises. The companionship care provided – now from two regular carers - is of very high quality and has enhanced Louise’s quality of life enormously – I believe that genuine friendship has been established

with the carers - and this has been helped by keeping the same ladies involved. The fact that the age and general life experience (children, grandchildren etc) of the carers is not so different to mum's helps a great deal. Although mum is beyond remembering names – mum's smile of recognition and pleasure when her new friends arrive for a visit and the warmth of exchanged hugs is unambiguous. Louise was delighted that they accepted an invitation to her 90th birthday party!

Additionally, SHS have also been a source of comfort and wisdom for the family - I have had many long chats with the carers and managers in our joint endeavour to better understand mum's condition and do our best for her. I genuinely believe we have worked as close "partners" in this and at no time have I ever felt "just another customer". Some other occasions when I have particularly valued SHS services are outlined below.

- On a few occasions Louise would not answer morning 'phone calls from family – leading to worry about her well being and safety, though invariably she was just sleeping late. SHS became a major safety net – making on my request unscheduled calls to check on her using the key-safe. In one case being at the house within 5 minutes of my 'phone call!
- In summer 2014, the frequency of Louise's disoriented spells increased. Within a day or two, at my request and with no fuss, SHS increased the frequency of mum's visits from 3 times a week to once each day. New carers were introduced – all of very high quality.
- In autumn 2014, with increasing disorientation, we decided to exchange Louise's visits to Age UK with day care at a residential home – with a view to eventual full-time residential care. Unlike Age UK there was no bus transport provided. The SHS care again showed great adaptability and understanding – with a new schedule generated to drive Louise to the home and pick her up.
- Later, when visits to the residential home seemed to upset mum, SHS carers advised us on this and together we took the decision to stop visits there and instead organised that her carers would take mum out for lunch on days when home meals were not delivered. This worked very well.
- In spring 2015 mum did eventually move into residential care. SHS were again very flexible and supportive. Helping the family to talk mum through the move, providing additional visits at short notice to help family make preparations at the home and advising us all the time. Mum's two SHS carers continue to visit her in the care home and this has helped a great deal with the transition process.
- Numerous kindnesses from the carers: endless cups of tea and coffee with mum and a friendly face, open ears and encouragement when she was feeling low; reminding mum to use olive oil ahead of ear syringing (something mum would forget to do and we could not do with required regularity); long hours on several occasions being with and reassuring mum during hospital stays and appointments; checking the house was warm enough in winter; help with sorting out a broken TV; taking mum's washing home when her machine broke down; taking photos (and giving mum copies to jog her memory) of excursions enjoyed as well as of old friends and relatives when they happened to visit at the same time as SHS; keeping an eye and reporting back on mum's mood and well being; letting family know of household issues – e.g. need to replace a broken kettle; taking mum out on drives (which she loved) to her favourite places around East Kent; helping us to set up a Skype link with mum (which took some time to get right).

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