

Hugh's story.

Hugh came to the Village Centre in December 2022 when his flat was flooded by a burst water tank 2 flats above. Everybody in the block was evacuated. Hugh was put into the Holiday Inn by his insurance company. He was given breakfast in the Holiday Inn. The Insurance company provided an allowance for him to buy Lunch and Dinner. For dinner he would buy a Marks and Spencer's microwave meal, he gave this to the chefs at the Holiday Inn who would microwave it, put it on a fancy plate, add extra veg and deliver it to his room for him. For Lunch Hugh came to the Village Centre Café.

One day not long after his flat flood he was walking past the Village Centre and noticed the Café sign and walked in. He loved it. He enjoyed the food and everyone was warm and friendly and made him feel welcome. He came back the next day and the next. Every day, 6 days a week, the Café was his lunch venue. The staff in the cafe quickly noticed that this older gentleman was coming every day to the cafe. So they got chatting to him. He told them his story. They asked about what was happening in his life. They spent time with him and made him realise that they genuinely cared about him.

The Café can be very busy at lunchtime and some days when Hugh arrived there wasn't a free table. The Cafe staff would go to him and say,

“Oh, there's not a space free to sit at table by yourself, but there is Anne, who also comes in by herself, let me check if she would be happy for you to sit with her.

Anne, are you happy to have a guest at your table who has nowhere to sit?

Absolutely.”

The two of them got talking. They arranged to meet for lunch the next week and ended up meeting for lunch every week because they were both on their own and enjoyed the company. Hugh of course was still coming in every other day of the week.

Another day, Hugh was sitting at table by himself, reading his book, having his lunch, and a couple of younger ladies came in, maybe in their 40s or 50s, and the place was busy, no free tables, they went to turn around to

leave, but Joanne was walking into the cafe at that point, noticed Hugh and said to the ladies,

“Girls, if you don't mind sharing a table, I know that Hugh over there would love the company.”

They said, “We’d love that. That would be great.”

So they went over and sat beside him and had their lunch alongside Hugh. After lunch they arranged with Hugh to meet him once a week at the library and go for an afternoon coffee.

So now this gentleman who was out of his house and had been feeling a bit lonely and isolated because he lived alone and was staying in a hotel, now suddenly had friends: Anne for lunch once a week; two ladies whom he met for coffee each week. Through coming to the Village Centre he was building friendships.

Hugh was in the hotel for 11 months in total. He said that living in the hotel was like being Richard Gere in the film *Pretty Woman*. Like Gere, his hotel life meant he was constantly surrounded by interesting characters, a constant flow of the people who were around about there. In one of his many chats with Joanne, he asked her,

“Do you think I should sell my flat and live in a hotel full time?”

Joanne said, “Well Richard Gere did it. So I don't know. I don't see why not. Except, that was just a film!”

Eventually the insurance company were able to track Hugh down because he kept ignoring their calls because he didn't want to move out of the hotel and move back to his flat. But the Insurance Company explained that they could no longer pay for the hotel because his flat was now repaired. So he moved back into his flat.

He kept coming to the Cafe for lunch, but he was not happy. When he closed his door in the evening, he was alone and felt isolated after the hustle and bustle of the noise in the hotel. To make matters worse there was anti-social behaviour in his block of flats. One of the other tenants was causing him a bit of distress. This person would bang his door and shout “I'm going to kill you in your sleep, old man.” And lots of other horrible threats. So Hugh was very frightened in his own home now, as well as feeling isolated.

He spoke to his local authority councillor. He went to the Housing Department. He tried everywhere, but there was nothing anyone would do because they refused to move the man who was threatening Hugh out of his flat, because the man had mental health issues.

Hugh was still coming to the Café every day and chatting with Joanne and the Café Staff about his problems.

Hugh became so stressed about the whole situation that he suffered a stroke and was rushed to hospital. The authorities became aware that this situation was serious so when he had recovered, they moved him into a bungalow in a council amenity housing complex in White Hills because they realised that he could not go back to his flat and live in that stressful situation.

He loves his new home and really enjoys the company of the other older people who all go out and enjoy doing the garden and speaking to each other. They have a lovely community.

His stroke meant that was no longer able to drive but the Village Centre was so important to him that he wanted to continue coming to meet Joanne and the Staff whom he now looked on as his family! So he arranged with a friend to give him a lift one day. He spoke to Joanne and said how much he wanted to keep coming to the Café but couldn't manage now because he couldn't drive. While Hugh was in having lunch, Joanne checked out the bus timetable from his home in Whitehills. She downloaded the First Bus App onto Hughs phone and explained to him what buses he would be able to get, where the bus stop was in relation to his house, and how he'd be able to get to the Café to meet up with the friends that he had made. He is back to coming in a few times a week.

The week before Joanne left, he spoke to her and said,

“Joanne, I'm devastated that you're leaving because every day that I see you, you make my life better in some way. I just love my time here at the Village Centre.”

He spoke to Joanne's replacement, Nadina, and explained what a lifeline the Village Centre had been for him because he suddenly had these friendships.

At the Café he has recently made a new friend who invited him along to a fitness class at the John Wright Sport Centre. And so he now goes to that fitness Class a couple of times a week, and he's made some great friends there whom he meets for a coffee.

As a result of his stroke his eyesight is not so good, so he finds reading a bit difficult. So when he's in at the Café, if he's on his own, Bronagh will sit with him and read a few pages of his book to him and have a chat.

That is Hugh's Story. A man whose life was devastated by a flood, but through it found care, hope and friendship in the Village Centre where the staff have become a family, and the place a safe haven of love.