



Come In
WE'RE
OPEN

Alone Together

Sarah Baxter meets the local heroes fighting to eliminate loneliness.

Retirement is something that many people embrace after a lifetime of work. It's a phase of life when senior citizens hope to spend more quality time with family or focus more of their attention on hobbies. They may also relish the opportunity to travel to exciting, far-flung places or to learn new skills.



For some, however, the later years of retirement in particular can seem a daunting prospect, since family members may live far away and ill health might hinder mobility. If leaving the house becomes a struggle, regular contact with others can begin to dwindle — many elderly people lose contact with their communities entirely. A scenario such as this can often lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation.



Fortunately, in one coastal town in Cumbria, two local heroes are tackling the problem of loneliness in old age head-on. John Mason, a part-time mechanic, and his wife Olga, the owner of a café, have transformed the lives of dozens of lonely senior citizens through a campaign they call 'Alone Together'. The dedicated duo have kindly agreed to tell us more about the programme.

What was the inspiration for 'Alone Together'?

John: Olga and I were out for a walk one Sunday morning when we noticed an elderly gentleman who was sitting outside his house, watching the world go by. He struck up a conversation and told us that he lived alone; his wife had died and his only child had sadly passed away many years earlier. He did have two grandsons, but they weren't local. To complicate matters, he had health problems and found walking strenuous.



Olga: John and I were moved by the gentleman's story. He didn't actually admit to being lonely, but we could tell that he was because he was obviously pleased that we'd stopped to pass the time of day with him.

John: His story lingered in our minds and made us think about just how many senior citizens were suffering from loneliness in our town. We suspected there were lots of people out there living alone, and we immediately began to devise an action plan to bring them together.

How did you set up 'Alone Together'?

Olga: John and I decided to make use of the resources we already had. I suggested that my café could be perfect as a meeting place for elderly people, and John set about organising transport. By tinkering away at an old van generously donated by his boss, John created a minibus with disabled access.

John: It didn't take long before everything was in place. The bus was soon up and running, and Olga quickly came up with a range of activities for elderly visitors to the café to enjoy. We weighed up the options about how to spread the word of our new venture. We had considered sending out emails to tell the town's senior citizens about 'Alone Together', but we didn't want to exclude those without a computer. Phone calls can also be quite intrusive. Instead, we used flyers, a move which proved extremely successful; within 24 hours, we had a long list of people who wanted to join us. Our next step is to raise enough money to be able to take our elderly visitors on a trip away — maybe to the seaside, or to the theatre.



'Alone Together' has had an incredible impact on this small Cumbrian town. Activity sessions take place four times a week, and Olga's café accommodates as many people as possible. Last Thursday, we visited the café and interviewed two of the programme's regulars — William, who is 72 years old, and Frances, aged 84.

'Alone Together' has been a vital lifeline for William, who has been living alone since his wife, Sylvie, moved into a residential care home.

"I discovered 'Alone Together' when I saw their flyer at Sylvie's care home," William told us. "I wasn't sure if it was for me, but Sylvie's carers encouraged me to go along. At my first meeting, I met Harry, who I clicked with right away; his wife suffers from the same illness as my Sylvie. Knowing that someone else was in my situation made my loneliness seem more bearable. John and Olga have given me a lifeline."



Frances, a retired lawyer, echoed William's thoughts.

"John and Olga are certainly heroes. I lost touch with my friends when I moved to America. Having returned to Cumbria to care for my sister, who has since passed away, I've been short of ways to reconnect with old acquaintances and make new friends. 'Alone Together' has given me a new lease of life, and my wheelchair's not even a problem for John's bus. The days I spend at the café are the highlight of my week, and I wouldn't give them up for the world."

Having seen the work that John and Olga do first-hand, it wasn't hard to see why William and Frances were singing their praises.

John and Olga's efforts have earned them a nomination for the top prize in this year's 'County Heroes' competition. The winners will receive £500 towards their charity or campaign. John and Olga would be worthy winners — readers can vote on the county website. The results will be announced next week!