



Listening Tent: North Argyll Carers 12 September 2020

For this Listening Tent conversation we're travelling through the wonders of Zoom to Oban on the northwest coast of Scotland, to listen in on Mairi (Fleck), Joan (McDonald) and Kim (O'Keefe) who all live in Oban and are part of North Argyll Carers Centre.

Late last year, North Argyll Carers applied for a respite stay through Landmark Trusts 50 for Free scheme. Mairi is learning and development coordinator for the organisation and in March 2020, just before lockdown, she travelled down to Saddell House on the Mull of Kintyre with a group of full time carers for their 50 for Free stay.

Among them were Kim, who's in her 40s, and Joan in her 70s. Kim looks after her adult son, and Joan has responsibilities both for her husband and her son. Their experiences remind us that being a full time carer is a role that can claim us at any life stage, and also of the benefits that even a brief time away can bring.

Here they are reminiscing about their stay at Saddell House...

Mairi: That day when we went to Saddell House, there was a we sentence that stuck in my mind and it was just: A triple car convoy full of chatting ladies. And so I just wondered like how did how did you feel when the when the convoy drove up that driveway and we saw that house and we got out the car? Joan?

Joan: Oh well, I looked at the size of the place and I thought, oh my god, it's enormous. How are we going to fill all that but, when the cars all drew up in line, I sighed and we got out and we all started chatting not having been together since leaving Oban. It's almost like we started bonding together like right away. And the fact that the house is so imposing, but there was this little painted stone with the key behind it and that was so homely, and I thought, oh it's going to be all right.

Kim: Yeah, I just when we drove up I was just like, the castle and then coming up over the little bridge and the water and then the house and going around the house and it was just amazing. And this amazing scenery was just yeah, and it's a beautiful house.

Mairi: And I think for me having the journey there – if had been somewhere that was like five minutes away, it wouldn't have felt the same. But because we have that journey, and for a lot of you, I know it was an area that you haven't visited before and it's an area that I know reasonably well. So that was really nice. And also I like to be able share that that area with people. So is there a particular favourite thing that just sticks out in your mind? Like one of the things that we did together or something you did on your own when you were there. Joan?

Joan: Well when we got in there was crockery and a tea pot and beautiful yellow daffodils on the table and it felt so welcoming. The house was so imposing and that tea tray was so homely, you just sort of felt that it helped to settled you in. And one of the girls brought along her own China teapot and this lovely fine crockery as well. So we'd been promised this lovely tea and we had that and it was, that was us starting to gel together. And so that was it, the big yellow colour kind of sticks in my mind.

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Kim: See I didn't find the house imposing. I thought it was imposing when you first went up, but as soon as you open those doors, and the tiles and that little bathroom with the wooden toilet seat, and the spindle staircase with that love heart in it. It just felt like home. It really felt like my home. And it was just... the whole thing. It was it was actually too much emotion for me. It was, um, see, I'm getting all (woah) now because I just, I couldn't contain myself. I was just so happy to be away from my caring role and the house was just so more than I could ever imagine in the world. And yeah, everything was just, you know, amplified.

Mairi: The rooms were all so different, I really like that. And for me trying to organise who slept where was a challenge and then I decided not to do that. We just picked out a room number and so it was like a lottery and I've written down - everyone was a winner.

Kim: And the rooms were so different. And everyone wanted to see everyone else's room and every room had something that was amazing about it

Mairi: The things I remember as well where the log fires and Joan lighting the log fires and Pamela arriving with the logs not long after we got there. And especially the Sunday dinner at the huge table. I thought that was just lovely to be able to share all the food together and it was the one meal that we all managed to eat with all our different data requirements.

So, what else sticks out in your memory? Joan I know there's something that sticks out in your memory.

Joan: Well, the whole the whole thing was so different from the lives you are living anyway. And none of us knew at that time what was going to happen, you know, just after we came back because that was probably the last properly sociable time we had with other people before locked down. And I think that made it that bit extra special. And the fact that there were so many different areas, you know. I can't, get out my head exploring them, or sort of creeping up the stairs and looking here and looking there and looking out at the view. And I think I got to the point where my senses were like so overloaded, I didn't know what to do next. And then when I got into my little room, which I discovered later was the rod room, because it had a painting of a fishing fly above the fireplace, it was so quiet and so calm. I just got organised and got my paper and pencils out. And I was really worried that I wouldn't be able to write to order, if you know what I mean, but there was no problem once I was in that room it was a we bolt hole and it wasn't a problem at all. And, the fact that we were away from television, all the things that, you know, phones, all the things that stop you communicating properly with the people that are in the same space as you are. I thought that that was that was really good.

Mairi: Yeah, I think that was really special for me as well. So we were just there as a group. It made it so much easier to focus on just being together and what we were doing with our writing. And then we came back to this changed world really.

Kim: And that to me was the thing that was really important for me. It was, the connection with everyone and being present, because I hadn't been present, and I hadn't been with me. I'd always, it was always looking after my other person. I hadn't been with myself for what nearly 20 years. And that was like a whole other experience in itself. But yeah, just like the people and the connections

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and just how we worked so well together in the big beautiful house. Like the kitchen, where we all sort of came and went, and the meals flowed. And we all had our own little jobs, but nothing was allocated. It just flowed so beautifully.

Mairi: I think as well, because we had a group that meets regularly to do writing, so we sort of knew each other a we bit, but it was a completely different thing going away together like that wasn't it. And somewhere that was it was completely new to all of us.

Joan: Sometimes when you're by yourself, you're looking for inspiration. But when you hear the things that other people are writing and you share them, that can be very emotional. And there was one point where I had written a poem using Saddle House, an acrostic poem. And when I read it out to the others, I got really, really emotional and a couple of them came over and just touched my hands. And I just felt like a warmth coming from the group. And that couldn't have happened, at any other kind of meeting or any other situation because we were actually, just for that time a we community and I really think I spiritually completely benefited from that experience. And when I was reading the poem the other day, you know, going over my things, and oh, I forgot how emotional I got. But just to be to be shown that kindness by other people. Because every single one of us is caring for a different, it's a different caring need that we're dealing with. But the commonality of escape, and at the same time, you're not quite escaped because it is there, you know, in the back of your mind there's this we switch that never goes off. But I certainly loved it and I don't think those kind of emotions could have happened in another setting, because it was so different. And the books in the history of the house. It was so fascinating. A couple of times the whole place could have actually been lost. And to think that people were generous enough to make donations that let that place be restored to such a place of comfort and beauty is amazing.

Mairi: I loved the way that the attention to detail in the house and the way it had been restored. So it felt like it just always been like that and do you remember that jigsaw puzzle that we found?

Joan: Oh, I couldn't let it go!

Mairi: Well, all practically stayed up all night trying to finish the jigsaw before we could go home.

Kim: Yes, desperate to finish it.

Joan: It took us a we while to realise what it was because we kept saying 'Where's the picture? But we were actually in the picture. It was the room that we were in. It was fascinating.

Mairi: Also, I really like the books where people have written lots of stuff about their stays as well, and some of the stuff in that was amazing.

Kim: Yeah, it felt, it made it even more connecting, like it was just all about connection for me, like connecting to the people that have been there connecting to the past, connecting to myself. It was just, yeah.

Mairi: And the fact that you know, the farmer who came with our firewood and that, he told us about the glen and how his family had farmed in the glen for generations. And his son was at

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college, and he was hoping to keep on. And he kind of brought us a connection to the land we were sitting in as well. I thought that was nice as well.

Mairi: It's to do with experience and the opportunity to have that experience.

Kim: I never thought I would have such an opportunity. Mine was just basically that it not only changed my life, it changed my son's life as well because it was the first time I'd left him, from birth, really. And it allowed, we were so close and it allowed him to find his independence and I found my independence. So from there we've blossomed, but on a different path and nothing could have ever done that for us. Because it was close enough to still feel safe, that I could rush home if need be, but far enough away that it was a proper, proper break.

Yeah, I know that has nothing to do with the house but still. It was just, yeah. wonderful.

Joan: I have a dual caring role. I have an adult son who's in the care home and my husband also has a problems arising out of an illness. I felt like I'd escaped the pair of them for the weekend. I'm in phone, contact with my disabled son every day, and down there, believe it or not, he actually managed to phone me. There was a weak signal. And when I came back the fact I have an immune disorder, which meant I was shielding as soon as I came back. So the fact that I had had this break away from it all, I think made it easier for me to cope with the fact that we were shut in together for 12 weeks because we were both shielding. When things got tight, I could look back and think about walking along the beach in my purple wellies with the foam coming over the toes. How my imagination kind of went off with the servants who would have worked at the house and the little bathing house at the end. I could kind of go back to there. I could bring that immediacy back into my lockdown situation. So the timing couldn't have been better, and the place couldn't have been better. I really, really appreciate the fact that we were facilitated to go.

If you'd like apply for Landmark's 50 for Free scheme, you'll find full details of how to sign up on the Landmark Trust website. You'll also find details of North Argyll Carers and other carer support charities by searching online.

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