

A WAVE ACROSS THE CANAL INSPIRES IMOGEN, 21, TO BECOME A WIMBLEDON GUILD BEFRIENDER AND FUNDRAISER



A chance encounter with an elderly lady on a canal bank inspired busy student Imogen Horn to give up her time and volunteer as a befriender with local charity Wimbledon Guild.

The 21-year-old now loves spending time with 83-year-old Vera who the charity introduced her to and is taking on three gruelling swimming challenges to raise funds to help support its work.

Imogen, who is studying medicine at St George's University, became a volunteer befriender a year and a half ago when she was aged just 19.

She said: "I was on a walk along a canal one day and I saw an older lady on the opposite bank – I'm not really sure why but I had an urge to wave to her.

"She waved back and I carried on but she still stood there. It was such a brief interaction but it really touched me for some reason.

"Then I couldn't stop thinking about how little effort we make to reach out to others who are not strictly relevant and central to our everyday lives. It made me think how many thousands of people there are out there, young and old, who are lonely and isolated."

The plight of those suffering from loneliness continued to play on Imogen's mind until she spotted Wimbledon Guild's Mitcham charity shop from the bus one day.

Imogen, from Earlsfield, explained: "I decided to have a look into the work Wimbledon Guild does and I was so impressed. I was so pleased to hear that the charity is such a lifeline for so many people. I looked into volunteering and found the befriending scheme most suited me and that is how it began."

Imogen spends two hours a week with Vera and says the relationship has enriched her own life. The two have become firm friends and she is urging others to come forward and join the befriending team.

She said: “I love being a befriender! I am paired with one of the most interesting, strong and kind-hearted women I have ever met. I have learnt a huge amount from her and also found a great friend.

“Befriending is definitely not what I imagined. I thought it would be a very tame and gentle chat over a cup of tea whilst I desperately thought of what to say next. It is SO far from that! We have become really close, to the point where it is like talking to one of my housemates! I hope I have in some way improved her life, as she has certainly more than done the same for me.

“When you think about it, there are so many people in this position and I wish we could all do something about it and open our doors to let people in and likewise be welcomed in by others.

“Please think about becoming a befriender – I cannot recommend it enough and Wimbledon Guild always need people to volunteer.”

Inspired by Wimbledon Guild’s work, keen swimmer Imogen is tackling three gruelling open water challenges, swimming almost 20 kilometres, to raise funds to support the charity.

On July 1, she completed the first of two 5k swims, the Great London Swim at Docklands. On August 20, she takes on the 8.3 km Long Reach Swim along the Thames near Oxford, and finishes with the River Adur 5km swim near Brighton on August 26.



Emma Aldridge, Wimbledon Guild’s Head of Welfare, said: “As Imogen has found, these visits can not only make a huge difference to the lives of older people but also to our volunteers.

“We wouldn’t be able to fulfil our vision to improve the wellbeing of people in Merton without the help of our volunteers like Imogen and we are grateful to each and every one of them.”

- You can support Imogen by donating to her fundraising appeal: <https://www.justgiving.com/wimbledonguild> .Wimbledon Guild also has two sought-after spaces for next year’s Virgin London Marathon and is offering runners the chance to take part while raising funds in aid of the charity. Email events@wimbledonguild.co.uk for more information.
- If you are interested in befriending, you can call 020 8946 0735 for an informal chat, email volunteer@wimbledonguild.co.uk or visit www.wimbledonguild.co.uk.