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Howard's way: Elder Family Matters' carer Howard Vickridge and his client Nancy get the dishes out of the way. Mr Vickridge regularly cooks for her and enjoys chatting about current events. Photo: STEPHEN WILSON

Caring matters to Howard

Howard Vickridge is a caring man and he's found his true calling in life looking after people who need a helping hand.

HOWARD Vickridge got to a point in his life when he knew it was time to stop pursuing profit and start pursuing happiness.

At the time he was heavily involved in corporate public relations, managing volatile issues and looking after all things communication, often finding himself in the position of being ethically compromised.

Vickridge realised it was time to leave the corporate communications world and pursue happiness ever nearer.

Fast forward ten years – and work at Porirua's Pataka Museum, Capital E as festival general manager, as well as a BA (c) anthropology and a quick dabble in teacher training to boot – and Mr Vickridge reckons he's finally found his niche.

Today he's proud, and happy, to be a carer for Elder Family Matters, which provides quality at-home care for the elderly.

Spent one of 18 carers and one of only two men who work as independent contractors for the Wellington based organisation.

Mr Vickridge has no formal qualifications in caregiving, nor any medical qualifications, but when he saw the position advertised his history and life experience made him feel confident it was worth a shot.

He'd already had an inkling that caring might be for him when his father took ill, and eventually died of a brain virus two years ago.

"His brain resulted in the process of dementia. That experience of watching him was very, very confronting. I was present in how the elderly can retain a sense of control of their own world when their abilities are decreasing, it set off a lightbulb for me."

Almost two years after successfully applying for the job with Elder Family Matters, Mr Vickridge is still revelling in his role, looking after up to four different clients for 12-16 hours on average on any given week.

"As soon as I started working with clients I knew that I was doing the right thing, it just felt right."

One client is a couple he lives with while he is on duty. Mr Vickridge is the cancer to Mr Vickridge spends a few hours a week in their home cleaning, scrubbing the bathroom, cleaning the car bowl and offering any other support they may need.

"The mechanical work is dead easy, and anyone can do it ... engaging me as an early stage means that if their needs do grow and they already feel comfortable with me, they can be confident they've got the right kind of carer."

Another client is a 95-year-old Nancy, who Mr Vickridge regularly cooks for.

"I really love my time there. She's really well-educated and really current, I enjoy chatting about everything. The truth of it, she can talk about Stolock, I can come to her with a snippet of poetry and nine times out of 10 she will be able to say which poet it's from.

"It all contributes to her sense of engagement and purposefulness and on an intellectual level it is a lovely opportunity for me to learn from her as well."

All the while Mr Vickridge is looking and listening for any changes in her and keeping an eye out for ways to improve quality of life.

Last Friday, Nan Nancy, I'm looking at little things that might be helpful, like finding a handle that's broken off a pot, or fixing the garden hose – easy for me but much harder for her to do.

"In this line of work, for me my priorities are to have a whole person approach with anybody that is seeking help. It's not for me to make them do something in their life, it's for me to fill the gaps and help them do what they want to do in their life."

For clients in care facilities it means giving them new experiences, taking them for drives, or walks, climbing on a chair to change a light bulb, or even or playing a game of mini-golf or lawn bowling.

There are also times when personal care is required, but Mr Vickridge finds that side of the job humbling, not off putting.

"Giving someone a hand to use a toilet, to do that with dignity, you're asking an awful lot of the person you're helping. They're asking you a lot of you, but it's one of the closest cares that one human can demonstrate to another."

Mr Vickridge's most humbling and rewarding moment, he says, has been being asked to accompany one of his clients to a Christmas Eve midnight mass.

He is the partnerch of the family, a person who has had a fully engaged and empowered life and has been involved in big corporations. He got Alzheimer's and suffers severe memory problems now but his intelligence is totally intact.

"For me to be able to socially chaperone him, to be able to give him a hand to engage properly with his family, for them to see him in control, to watch that process and to be part of that process was really rewarding to the point that I felt very valued when the family invited me to be part of the family wedding photography.

"In a sense, with people who suffer memory loss, my job is being a prosthetic – if they're insecure not knowing what town we're in or what month we're in, I can automatically feed them that information every, five minutes and it's a set of someones and anxieties that are taken away from them, they're not constantly reminded about what they can't remember."

Mr Vickridge says he too has grown as a person since becoming a carer, saying patience and acceptance of others' shortcomings is powerful and enhances him himself.

"Take a person who doesn't know your name after a year, or can't remember what car they hopped out of 10 minutes ago, for me, I need to just accept that is how they are and it's not something that's wrong.

"Families on the other hand, naturally, find it terribly hard, particularly with memory loss, because they know what the person they love has lost, and they get very quickly frustrated when the same conversations they had five minutes ago are repeated over and over again."

With all his clients Mr Vickridge returns a professional relationship, but also strives up a friendship of the heart.

And though that makes it tough if a client passes well or worse, dies, he remains upbeat.

"I remember one Tuesday I'd gone out with a client in his wheelchair around Oriental Parade. We'd gone over some good bumps, we'd had a great time, it was a lovely afternoon. He went to bed the next night and never woke up.

"We had a great time the day before I couldn't be happier, his life was at its natural end and it had been good till the end. Death's natural and inevitable, it's not necessarily horrid or tragic."

Caring and nurturing is all part of Mr Vickridge's psyche; he comes from a caring family with a former chemist and mother a masseuse, nurse.

Growing up he remembers often having his 'sisters from the local psychiatric hospital over for high tea.

And for the past 23 years he's visited an institutionalised schizophrenic friend every few weeks.

"All my life I've known about brains that are behaving in a little differently than most, right from when I was tiny, so it isn't scary to me at all. I've always been interested in representations of the marginalised."

But being a good carer not only requires understanding, compassion and empathy, it also requires patience, and patience are other issues for him.

"I'm walking down a flight of stairs with a client, for example, I always get myself in front of them so they don't have to try hard to stay upright. I'll walk across a pebble and a stone is in the way; I'll point it out rather than step over it, it's the little things."

As for whether Mr Vickridge has finally found happiness over profit: "I definitely have. It's really lovely when you meet someone who's in a grumpy mood and frustrated, then you spend a couple of hours with them and you leave with them smiling."

'Big picture' people needed to help others

WHEN it comes to recruiting carers, Elder Family Matters' looks for people who bring both their hearts and minds to their work.

The Wellington based organisation, which provides quality at-home care for the elderly, currently has about 35 carers on its books.

While some have medical backgrounds, Elder Family Matters general manager Lawrie Stewart says attitude and experience are more important than formal qualifications.

"We offer reliable, trusting and kind caregivers who are really there to help the elderly have an improved quality of life."

Elder Family Matters' client base varies but usually hovers around 50, some of whom only require a few hours' care a fortnight while others might need 80 hours a week.

Each client's needs differ; some want someone to clean for them, some require full personal care, showering and dressing, others need someone who might need someone to take them out of their environment, stimulate them and open their world up.

"It's not about wanting to just get a job done and move on to the next client, we want people who will look at the whole person in the whole context of their environment, who are observant to any changes and respond to them accordingly," says Mr Stewart.

The organisation looks for people who can pick up on the "eccentricities" of older people, he says. People prepared to make more than a cursory check on those in their care.

A perfect example was a few days ago when a carer was visiting a client's house, waited at the door and there was no response. He rang on, was rang their family and found out the person had actually fallen asleep outside," he says.

"It is very important to stay and find out what the problem is; we don't want people who will just walk away from a situation."

Carers must also be willing to listen to stories that might go off on all sorts of tangents, because the client feels special and that whatever they say is important to the carer.

"We look for people who can take clients to interesting places too, for example, encouraging an inactive client into growing vegetables or taking them to movies and debate and discuss what it said and what it means to them afterwards."

As Mr Stewart says, it's not just continuity of care that's important to his organisation, it's about building relationships.

"Some clients have had the same carer for five or six years. It's about developing a relationship, a friendship or camaraderie."

It's all part of Elder Family Matters' approach to caring, which is holistic, under which it operates – personalised care based on the level of independence of the person, connecting with them emotionally and socially and looking after their physical wellbeing, and connecting with the environment the person lives in.

"We're focused on being an agency that is a communication hub – we keep the communication lines open with family, GPs and other agencies that might be involved.

"We can provide the example of one client who went to hospital. Their local town was phoned Elder Family Matters, which connected him with their carer and the carer made hospital visits to provide reports to the family.

"That's our strength: many family members may be abroad, but whatever the case we communicate with clients' families in terms of how their mother or father is getting on and the different things they're doing so they actually feel connected."

For those needing care, a simple phone call will result in an home-long visit to a potential client, preferably with a family member in attendance.

Mr Stewart says during that conversation we find out a lot about the person, what their medical position is, mobility, continence, aids they might have, alarms and we find out about their background in terms of dependents, relationships, interests, beliefs and values that they hold dear.

"We look at the whole person and within that we then decide which of our carers is most closely related and can provide them with the best service for that client.

To become a carer or for anyone needing care call 385 8505 or go to: elderfamilymatters.co.nz.

Pencil Sketch

- **Name: Howard Vickridge.**
- **Inspired by: My grandfather Clifford, my ageless friend Jeanine.**
- **Favourite movie: Zoolander.**
- **Favourite Album: *Red Hot and Blue*, by various artists.**
- **Favourite Quote: 'We pass through this world but once, therefore any good deed we can do or kindness we can show to any fellow creature let us do it now for we shall not pass this way again.' – From a sign on the wall of grandfather's office.**
- **Favourite website: Trademe.**
- **Favourite Food: Scotch fillet, green beans, broccoli and new potatoes.**