

Robin Mills met Mary Kahn in Lyme Regis



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I spent the first 17 years of my life in Winnersh, which was then a small village in Berkshire. As a youngster I helped my mum with Meals on Wheels, visiting a whole host of different people who relied on this support for one hot meal a day. This was my first memory of being involved with community support, something my mum has always done, and is still volunteering at 84.

After A levels I worked in Colorado au pairing for a 4-year-old girl who had the world's first pig valve implanted successfully for a heart defect. I managed to travel a little in the US, then on my return I started my Registered General Nurse (RGN) training at Guys Hospital, London, learning my profession in the old-fashioned style. We were inspected by Matron before being allowed on the ward. No make-up, clean nails, polished shoes, hair off our collar, and our hats had to be pristine! I lived in a tiny but functional room in the Nurses' Home on site right by London Bridge...it really was great fun! Six months after starting training I was left in charge of an acute medical ward on a block of nights, so they really did throw us in at the deep end. Nonetheless, I always felt well supported by the Matron, and the amazing auxiliaries—these days called Health Care Assistants—who had such enormous experience and

Mary Kahn

didn't appear to be phased by anything. It was a great way to learn the job, very much patient led. My first salary, which at the time felt like a lot of money, was £2100 per year. During my 3-year training I flat-shared in various parts of south London, Camberwell Green, Peckham, and Sydenham. In those days if you had a student nurse's card you could get a free lift home in a black cab after midnight, which I made use of many times! I was very proud to qualify as an RGN in 1989.

I worked in Orthopaedics for a while on Queens Ward, right at the top of the tower with incredible views over London. I then moved to Somerset, and then Axminster, left nursing, and worked in the health care industry, initially in pharmaceuticals. Later I worked in orthopaedics for a company that made hip, knee, and other implants.

My husband Bruce and I moved with our children and pets to our current home in 2003. After leaving St. Marys' RC Primary School, Axminster, our three children went to The Woodroffe School in Lyme Regis. I became involved with the PTFA and then as a governor, a post I held for 12 years. During the last 4 I had the privilege of supporting the school as Chair of the Governing Body. I thoroughly enjoyed this time and learnt so much about education and the challenges our schools face.

In 2011 I completed my back to nursing degree, then worked at Bridport Community Hospital, and at the local hospice. I found it fascinating to return to my first career and see the significant changes in systems and processes.

In 2017 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was the year my husband and I were both planning to celebrate our 50th birthdays, and our eldest daughter was getting married. My diagnosis happened shortly after the wedding. I had an enormous amount of support from family and friends, but when I finished treatment I 'wobbled'. After my operations and treatment, I was told, "off you go, and get on with your life". However, I found it really hard to find my 'new normal'. I went to see my GP, Dr Yvonne Hodges, one of the most remarkable women I know, who said, "you've got PTSD, of course you have, you've had cancer". She made it ok not to be ok. She referred me to Dorchester for 6 sessions of counselling, which made a huge difference. It then struck me that where we live is a geographical cul-de-sac, an hour from our main hospitals, Exeter, Dorchester, Taunton, or Yeovil, what happens if you can't afford the time

the money, or even the energy, to access counselling. So, I asked Yvonne what she thought about setting up a local charity; she said it would make a real difference. I am truly thankful she believed in me and became our first trustee. Little did I know that 5 years later we would have over 560 people who have registered for support.

We had our first planning meeting round our kitchen table in June 2018, calling ourselves Axminster and Lyme Cancer Support. Round that kitchen table were many people who are still very much supporting ALCS today—including my mum! We held a fundraising tea party which raised just under £1000, and that October we held our first drop-in.

There hasn't been a "normal" period since, because as we were beginning to find our feet the pandemic happened. Our first Zoom drop-in was a challenge! The isolation that the pandemic brought created a huge increase in those asking for support, asking to connect. After diagnosis and treatment, people are looking for a connection, and to be reassured that it's ok not to be ok. In his book *The Community Cure*, James Maskell talks about the importance of being with your tribe; when you are diagnosed with cancer, you suddenly have a new, different language to that of your friends who are cancer-free. We often need to find a 'new tribe', an additional support network alongside our family and friends. Although it's not a club anyone wants to belong to, we help people to connect with others who speak that language.

Since we started the charity we've referred people for over £140,000 worth of support, the vast majority of which is for counselling, but it could also be aqua therapy, acupuncture, Nordic walking, or creative writing. We allow people to choose what support they feel they need; all support is free. During treatment people lose control over so much of their lives and become beholden to their appointments, and the side effects of treatment. We like to recommend an approach that helps people think, feel, and move. At any one time, at our drop-ins there could be someone who has cancer, a carer for someone with cancer, someone receiving treatment, somebody with secondary cancer, or someone who's been bereaved. Our support seems to work in some way for all of them. Since the pandemic many things have changed, and referrals/appointments take much longer in the NHS.

I have the most amazing team helping me, all bringing a unique



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skill mix that makes ALCS what it is today. We're just about to move into new premises in Axminster and will be offering support Monday to Friday. We will have 34 volunteers supporting ALCS with a broad range of experience to support local people affected by cancer. Many of our volunteers have had personal experience of cancer and are able to listen while clients talk about what they are finding hard. I feel very blessed to have such a great team of people who are happy to give back to their community.

People are often referred to us by their cancer support nurse, the consultant or their GP, and anyone affected by any cancer can self-refer. We do ask for a short registration form to be completed and this can be done face to face, over the phone or online; we are then able to refer to one of our professional partners for the most relevant support. Some choose to come to our weekly drop-in, and we have seen many friendships form. People are welcomed regardless of how long

ago they had cancer impact their lives.

The film company who produced *Ammonite*, based in Lyme about the life of Mary Anning (who died of breast cancer), donated a fund to the Town Council to provide a legacy. After applying for the donation, we were delighted to be awarded funds which have provided us with a beautiful beach hut. This has been a massive success for our clients, who can book a day in the hut on Lyme's amazing seafront to spend on their own or with friends or family. It is booked all year round.

I swim in the sea every day of the year. After my diagnosis I began swimming in the winter, and just kept going. I absolutely love it, I swim off the beach here towards the sunrise, with a small group of people. I now know many people impacted by cancer that find sea swimming beneficial, especially through the winter months! I also love my garden. Being outdoors is my happy place, my healing place.

