

Prime Minister Teresa May has named Tracey Crouch, MP for Chatham and Aylesford, as her new minister for loneliness. May has vowed to tackle the huge problem, endured by nine million Brits, including around 200,000 elderly people who say they haven't had a conversation with a friend or relative in over a month.

Teresa May said: "For far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life. I want to confront this challenge for our society, and for all of us to take action to address the loneliness endured by the elderly, by carers, by those who have lost loved ones, people who have no one to talk to or share their thoughts and experiences with."

The new position filled by Crouch comes after recommendations from the Jo Cox Commission, named after the murdered MP who campaigned to prevent loneliness.

Crouch stated that: "We can make significant progress in defeating loneliness. This is an issue that Jo cared passionately about, and we will honour her memory by tackling it, helping the millions of people across the UK who suffer from loneliness."

In 2017, I went to find out what's being done in Medway to combat this unfortunate reality, and stumbled across some truly breath-taking work by volunteers.

Over half of all people aged 75 and over live alone, and two fifths of all older people say that the television is their main company.

For the past three years or so Age UK Medway's befriending scheme has been combatting this very real problem in Medway's community.

The charity pairs up volunteers with lonely elderly people, and organises meets once a week to chat about anything and everything on their mind.

I went along with befriender Ron Day to meet 93-year-old Raymond Grose, and to get an insight as to how far this little bit of company can go.

Ray was born in 1924 and served his Country in the Second World War in the Army. He was involved in the Normandy Landings and was presented with the ultimate medal (Legion of Honour) earlier this year making him a Chevalier de la Legion d'honneur the highest award possible.

He has no legs from the thighs down, his hearing and sight are fading, but Raymond remains as sharp as ever.

Before we made our way to Ray's room at Pembroke house, Gillingham, a home for ex-servicemen and women, I met Ron in the waiting room to talk about his relationship with his befriender.

"Ray has no children and his wife died some 5 years ago so you can imagine that at the age of 93 he will have suffered loneliness for long periods and I feel that at least with my visits he has something to look forward to and somebody that he can turn to in a time of need," Ron explained.

As a member of the scheme for many years now, Ron described how rewarding he finds it, something which was clear from the first moment I'd met him. It was obvious that this wasn't work to him, it was more like a privilege, a way to give back while also enjoying what he did.

"Befriending is both inspiring and gratifying. The pleasure in the giving of time, a listening ear and a kindly smile warms the heart. The Age UK Medway Befriending service has grown greatly in a very short period of time and the joy it gives to many isolated, lonely, older people is wonderful.

"My befriendees look forward so very much to my visits when we have a chat over a cup of tea reliving many of their incredible memories of things experienced in their colourful lives. It gives me a great feeling of fulfilment in that I am making their lives happier and they realise that in me they have a true friend."

I asked the 70-year-old if he would want a similar relationship with someone when he grows older, to which he replied: "I would like to feel that in my old age in similar situations I could welcome a Befriender into my home and over time form a special friendship with him/her."

Ron then took me to meet Raymond, and what struck me first was the look of sheer delight on Ray's face as he clocked his befriender's arrival. It became clear very quickly that this wasn't a carer/patient relationship, or visits out of pity, these two men had forged a strong friendship over the years they had been meeting.

I had planned for my first question to be, does the scheme work, but I no longer needed to ask it.

Instead I simply asked if Ray looked forward to Ron's weekly visits.

"I'd be lost if Ron stopped coming," Ray replied.

He went on to explain how his wonderful wife had passed away about five years ago, and most people looked at his missing legs and wheel chair and assumed that he was 'a bit gone.'

"They don't know you like I do though, do they Ray? He's a very sharp man," Ron chimed.

I had planned to interview a befriender, and one of their elderly friends about the scheme for this feature, but what I didn't expect was to find such an interesting man in Raymond Grose.

Upon his bed, Ray had lined up his old uniform, beret, and war medals. He listed the complete collection for me proudly.

"France/Germany star, 39/45 war, defence of England, general service King's medal, French medal of liberation, and Normandy. You had to serve between the 6th of June and 24th of June, for 6 continuous days in action to get that last medal. I served about 18."

Finally, he got to his most recent medal, the Legion of Honour.

"It was issued by the President of France last year, to all surviving Normandy veterans, as a thank you for delivering France from German occupation. It's the highest award for any civilian or military action. Makes me a chevalier, whatever that means.

"I'm very proud. It was so hard earned. I mean, everyone looks back on it now just as something that happened, but it wasn't at the time."

Not only was he a highly decorated veteran, with stories aplenty about the war, Raymond also went on to tell me how he had met the Queen, not once, but three times.

"I first met her in Hyde Park during the war. I was stationed in Park Lane, Piccadilly, attached to Knights Bridge barracks, and she was learning to drive in Hyde Park. Her car had broken down and there was a couple of lads trying to get it going. That's when I met her first."

He then joked: "Only six years to go. I want that letter from her Majesty."

As the interview came to a close, Ray remembered a piece of news he had not yet shared with Ron. This conversation, for me, encapsulates what the Befriend scheme is, and aspires to be.

"Oh, Ron, I didn't tell you, I'm going to be Father Christmas this year, for the kids' party."

"Oh, you're not! Crikey!"

"Yeah, they're going to give me a hat and a beard, no one will recognise me. I thought, in for a penny, in for a pound."

"Oh, wow, you tell me when, Ray, and I'll have to come down. Any day, just let me know."

The befriender, excited to share news, and the befriender doing everything to make sure he is free 'any day'.

The statistics for elderly loneliness are shocking and upsetting, but it's warming to know that there are people out there doing something about it, with amazing results such as these.

A parting message, as requested by Ray: "Any of my old comrades still alive out there, bless you all lads. Hope you're still as well as I am."

Become a befriender here- <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/medway>