

Generations meet: volunteering in St Petersburg



women are in Elena and Alexander's home. The atmosphere is exactly the opposite of what I expected: rather than sterile and lifeless, it's warm and friendly. When I go round every Tuesday, I feel like I'm stepping into someone's home. This atmosphere wasn't created overnight, nor was it created by accident: it's the result of Elena and Alexander's understanding of what the elderly need, namely understanding and compassion.

All I do at the home is talk to the elderly women. What we talk about can range from the weather (which seems to be as hot a topic here as in the UK!) and what I've been up to since we last met, through to their lives in the Soviet Union and how they feel about life in modern Russia.

Loans from St Gregory's Foundation allowed Elena and Alexander, leaders of the charity Zabota, to set up an old people's home in St Petersburg. Now occupying two flats in a single block, the home is self-financing. SGF continues to support the charity's care in the community programme, and to provide student volunteers who bring company and interest to the home's residents. If you know student who would like to volunteer, please encourage them to contact us.

A little more than six months ago, I made a phone call to a lady called Elena Galchenko. I wanted to ask her about volunteering opportunities at her home for the elderly in St Petersburg. Having not volunteered with the elderly before, I had no idea what this sort of volunteering might entail, but was very keen to find out.

At our first meeting, I was told all about the home and its residents. It's run on a not-for-profit basis by Elena and her husband Alexander and can house around ten elderly women. Due to old age, these women are unable to live independent lives and have no relatives who are able to help them. I quickly realised how lucky these

What's important, however, isn't what we talk about. It's the fact that we talk. These elderly women have no relatives, and due to the fact that the home is on the fourth floor of an apartment block, and that lifts are prohibitively expensive, the majority of them haven't stepped foot outside the home since they moved in. All this highlights just how important conversation, friendship and understanding are to them. I have to add, of course, that I don't volunteer at the home because I somehow feel sorry for these people. I do it because I enjoy it. Every week I look forward to having a natter with Lidia or Antonevna.

We're very lucky in the UK. We don't see elderly people begging on the street. Our system of care for the elderly may not be perfect, but it's better than what exists in Russia. In the future I hope that Elena and Alexander's fantastic home can be replicated on a larger scale, allowing more of Russia's elderly access to the sort of care that everyone should be able to expect in old age.

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