

Angels at work

For 20 years **Shipston Home Nursing** has been offering at home care for terminally ill patients, like Rita. Here her husband Allen and sister-in-law Christine share their story with Gill Sutherland

SHARING the story of the death of a loved one is not easy, but Allen Turner wants to talk to me about the loss of his beloved wife Rita to help promote the invaluable work of Shipston Home Nursing.

Rita sadly died aged 71 in August 2016 from thyroid cancer a year on from being diagnosed, and the nurses “were our angels” says Allen.

The Turners have a close extended family, and when Allen welcomes me into his Shipston home for tea and a chat, his sister-in-law Christine Dudfield (who is married to Rita’s brother Mark, and lives down the road in Stourton) is also there to lend emotional support.

They are both warm and open, keen to talk about Rita, to keep her with them, even though the pain of losing her is still etched on their faces, and tears well up as memories are recalled.

“We met at the Beat Club at the Townsend Hall around 1961. She asked me to dance... and I’d taken dance lessons in 1959 so I wasn’t afraid to get on the dancefloor,” laughs Allen. “From then on we were together.”

Rita was just 17, with Allen in his early 20s. The young couple dated for a few years. “Eventually Rita’s mum said ‘it’s about time you two got married’ so we did. We got married at St Catherine’s in Campden in 1967 – it would have been our golden wedding anniversary this month,” adds Allen poignantly.

“The wedding cost us next to nothing because we had nothing,” explains Allen – who speaks with a lovely Birmingham lilt – who came to the area from the city as 15-year-old to do agricultural work.

He continues: “Rita had her dress which was plain silk; after it went to the nuns and they made a vestment from the priest. Recycled you see!

“We moved into a tied house on the Batsford Estate, and I was a cowman there.”

The couple also lived in Newbold before settling in Shipston. They have one daughter, Sally, and a doted on grandson, Andrew, who’s nearly 12 – both live in New Zealand.

When I ask what Rita was like as a person, Christine and Allen both smile, and as they talk a picture of a wonderfully able and forthright character emerges.

“She was a Cotswold warden for 21 years,” says Christine. “She got on really well with all the farmers. If there was a footpath that was overgrown she’d have a word with them and it would be sorted. She was very well respected so they’d listen to her.”

Allen picks up the thread: “She was a warden until she got ill – and even then she still got involved for as long as she could – she always made carrot cake to bring along, she was famous for it – even though she couldn’t do the work herself she told them how to do it. The wardens still refer to her – ‘Rita wouldn’t like that’.”

He continues: “Rita was very individual – a positive person. It was very, very rare I went against her but when I did she let me.”

Recalling happy memories of their years together, Allen continues: “We ticked over; never really had any money, but we were happy... I’d finish work at midday on a Friday, by the time I got home the caravan was loaded up, we’d hitch up and then she’d tell me where to go. Nearly every weekend we went somewhere – everywhere and anywhere – usually in the middle of a field. When Sally was younger we’d go with other caravanning groups, but when she got older and didn’t want to come any more we just went on our own.

“One of our favourite places was Castlemorton Common just under the Malverns, we knew every footpath,” adds Allen, who in the last years of his working life was a right of way inspector, which he loved.

Allen says when Rita wasn’t walking she loved doing cross-stitch. Intricately embroidered artworks adorn the walls of the cosy living room – a large friendly-looking row of penguins in one movingly conjures happier times past.

Christine tells me that Rita would also use Skype (video call via a computer) everyday to keep in touch with her grandson. “She would even babysit – keeping an eye on Andrew when he was younger while Sally did the ironing. She watched him grow up through the years.”

In 2015 it was discovered Rita had medullary thyroid cancer – which is rare, one in a thousand cancers.

“She slowly became unable to reach for things,” explains Allen. “I had to lower the washing line, then lower something else... It was very gradual.

SHIPSTON HOME NURSING FAMILY STORY Rita Turner



MUCH LOVED: Rita was a Cotswold warden for 21 years

“When she found swallowing difficult we went to Warwick Hospital. They put the camera down and it was like a great big red mushroom down the back of her throat with all little yellow dots on it and the doctor there said he couldn’t do anything and referred us to a specialist at the Queen Elizabeth, Birmingham.

“They did a very tricky surgical procedure – she was a bit of a guinea pig really. During a nine-hour operation she had all her lymph glands removed down her neck and across her shoulders.”

Rita’s major concern was that she would be able to talk – her priority was to be able to chat with Andrew in New Zealand, explains Christine. But she’d had to have a tracheotomy during surgery and so had to use a white board.

“She used a white board to speak which for such an independent person was difficult,” says Christine.

Eventually she was able to speak again, but sadly the cancer came back. Allen explains that her oncologist put her on strong cancer-fighting drugs, but she needed another operation too.

“They got her to the operating ward for the pre-op and her doctor explained that he would have to give her another tracheotomy. ‘Oh no you’re not!’ she said, and refused the surgery. He said ‘What even if it means you’re dying?’ And she said ‘yes, even then’.”

Allen adds: “She knew her end was coming, and being able to talk to Andrew was the main thing – she was determined she would talk to him for as long as she could. We bought her an iPad to make it easier.”

Back at home in Shipston, Rita at first adamantly declined the services of the district nurse. But as her cancer spread she developed a large uncomfortable cyst on her spine and so she accepted help.

“We were put in contact with Shipston Home Nursing through our GP, Sue Pritchard,” says Allen. “They made sure we had everything we wanted, and at first visited alternately with the district nurses. They made sure her dressings were OK. They also sorted out a bed for downstairs – so Rita could keep an eye on me in the kitchen!”

Allen says that without Shipston Home Nursing Rita would not have been able to die at home as she wanted but would have had no choice but to go into a hospital or hospice. He can’t praise their fantastic dedication highly enough.

“One day I needed help and I rang SHN and one of the nurses was here in four minutes,” he says. “Another time I saw to Rita’s needs before the nurse came and I was just setting up to iron three shirts. The nurse asked me what I had intended to do if she had come earlier, and I said I was going to cut the grass. ‘Right,’ she said ‘you did my job so I will iron your shirts while you go mow the grass’.”

Christine echoes Allen’s praise for SHN, in fact since the loss of Rita, she has raised nearly £4,000 having

her head shaved for the charity, with which the family continue to be involved with and supported by.

“Rita asked the priest to come and she arranged her own funeral; everything was planned exactly as she wanted it,” continues Allen talking about his wife’s last days.

“SHN were with us every day. On the last day they knew more than I did what was happening and so they arranged an overnight nurse. Rita’s breathing got awkward and they eased the pain with a bit of morphine – which she had refused up until then.

“I’d gone to get some sleep and at about midnight the nurse said I think you’d better come down; and at 12.45am she passed as I held her hand.”

Heartbreakingly Allen describes how, because she couldn’t talk by the end, she had been writing on a white board. “It was only after that I realised what she had written. She couldn’t see or write very well so she’d written something a few times one on top of the other, she’d written ‘love you’ – and she never said that.”

Before I go, Allen wants me to know that he is getting well looked after by Christine and her family who have ‘adopted’ him, and by SHN. “They’ve invited me to some of their do’s and one of the senior nurses Barbara lives up the road, and she’ll pop in for a cup of tea. They are angels they really are.”

In Memoriam: Rita Turner, 30th April 1945 – 15th August 2016

You can help

Shipston Home Nursing is a local charity and relies on the fundraising efforts of its supporters. Anyone can take part in an activity to raise funds – like a sponsored head shave or attending events such as the recent 1920s ball at Admington Hall, *pictured right*. Two key upcoming events are:

DESIGNER POP-UP SHOP, Thursday, 2nd November (6pm-9pm) and Friday, 3rd November (9am-5pm) at Darlingscott Farm, Darlingscott, Shipston on Stour CV36 4PN
Don’t miss this annual sale of fabulous designer clothes and accessories from Armani, Temperley, Paul Smith, Diane Von Furstenberg, Joseph, Moschino and more. £5 entry.



20TH ANNIVERSARY CHRISTMAS GIFT FAIR, Tuesday, 14th November (5.30pm-8.30pm) and Wednesday, 15th November (9.30am-4.30pm). Ettington Community Centre, Rogers Lane, Ettington CV37 7SX. £5 entry, includes refreshments.

www.shipstonhomenursing.co.uk

Health matters

Coping with loss



Stratford psychotherapist Alex Golabek gives some simple approaches

Loss of a loved one can be difficult: firstly, we face the issue that they won’t return. This may spur on feelings familiar to those we experience during a relationship break-up. The pain related to abandonment and fears about the future can be, in this instance, relatively minimal because the person in question hasn’t physically disappeared. Hopes about them resurfacing sooner or later can serve as both a coping mechanism and a stick we beat ourselves with but overall, the loss seems somewhat temporary. In the case of bereavement, we must deal with being left forever. This can be very challenging to come to terms with and is a common focus of any advice we receive.

However, often forgotten are the feelings we encounter alongside the fact a person important to us has passed away; sadness, fear, anger, guilt or longing. These tend to surface differently for everyone and due to our vulnerability at that time, we may experience them more deeply than we would in other situations. Connecting with these feelings could be difficult because of our innate avoidance of anything ‘negative’. Showing anger is discouraged when we are children and we quickly realise that our tears would lead to immediate reassurance and warmth from adults, as opposed to punishment. Repressing it would seemingly benefit us in later life with our fears of being abandoned by those surrounding us less and less likely. Unfortunately, it doesn’t disappear. We harvest it. If it’s not expressed, we become a ticking time bomb and our relationships with other people suffer more profoundly, despite our best intentions. Some of us also inhibit sadness. In a world where ‘boys don’t cry’ translates to ‘strong people don’t show tears’, how can we allow ourselves to outwardly communicate sorrow? More importantly, how can we encounter grief without our emotional reactions to it? Is it possible not to feel upset when someone we love passes away?

Our individual experience of bereavement plays a crucial role in our overall wellbeing. Offloading onto others may seem tricky or impractical – after all, they are under no obligation to suffer along with us. What may seem surprising is that open and honest conversations about what we are going through may, in fact, deepen our relationships. Parallel to such dialogue, it is worth engaging in psychotherapy where our self-expression is encouraged and a thorough exploration of our emotions will help us stop feeling guilty about what is happening. A strong therapeutic alliance provides a non-judgemental, safe space essential to self-discovery, development and, ultimately, our health. It will also facilitate effective communication with the outside world. Often, bereavement brings questions of our own mortality. The therapist will help facilitate this, welcoming your specific spiritual beliefs. Accepting the loss of a loved one is an extremely complex and challenging process. Engaging in therapy will make this process shorter and more fulfilling. ■

Alex’s website is www.egotherapy.org. She practices at Lifeways (30 Albany Road, Stratford). Clients can contact her on 07746120266 or via the website on alexgolabek@egotherapy.org