

Brave Helen's "lovely" date with Queen

A Mochdre woman who battled bravely to beat a brain tumour was thrilled to be invited to see the Queen when she came to Llandudno.

Helen Leigh, 52, a systems assistant who works for the housing association, Cartrefi Conwy, attended the event in recognition of her voluntary work.

In her spare time Helen volunteers as a British Red Cross therapeutic carer and for the Conwy CICs Start Project which provides support to people in their own homes.

She regularly carries out home visits to people in need of companionship, some of whom have recently discharged from hospital.

In many cases, the pensioners she visits might otherwise have no day to day contact with a friendly face.

The Red Cross invited Helen and two of her fellow volunteers to represent the charity during the Queen's visit to Venue Cymru where she met volunteers from a number of care organisations.

Helen was delighted to be asked to go along and was excited at being allowed so close to the Monarch who was "lovely".

She added: "I was amazed to be asked but delighted. I have to thank Cartrefi Conwy for allowing me to go along and for their support over the years. It's a positive, very professional, working environment and I work alongside some great colleagues.

"I have never been refused time off for Red Cross training days or when I have needed to go for treatment or tests.

"The Queen was lovely, I didn't get to speak to her, I left that to the youngsters. She was fabulous though and was dressed all in pink.

"We were entertained by Llandudno Town Band and a children's singing theatre group. It was a brilliant, fabulous day and one I will never forget."

Helen, who hails from Kirkby Lonsdale, in Cumbria, spent six years in the RAF based at RAF Lyneham working in administration before working for Conwy Council for seven years.

Once Cartrefi Conwy took over the social housing stock she transferred her skills and has worked for the social housing landlords ever since.

However, it's been a tough nine years for Helen after she discovered she had a Meningioma, or brain tumour, deep within her brain.

She said: "I thought I had a cold or virus as part of my face went numb but then I developed double vision. I went to see my doctor and he sent me to St Asaph hospital, he thought it was some sort of facial palsy.

"However, they sent me for a brain scan and told me I would get the results by post. As it turned out, I got a letter on Easter Saturday informing me I had this tumour wrapped around my carotid artery.

"I was devastated and in absolute shock and panic. I had a two week wait for my appointment at Walton Neurological Centre. The problem was I wasn't sure if I had a death sentence hanging over me or not.

"And I had to break the news to my daughter, Natasha, who is 24 now and an environmental consultant in Swindon, but then she was just going through her GCSEs here in North Wales. It really was a terrible time."

Helen admits to spending hours trawling the internet for information on Meningiomas.

She said: "I joined an American site and was advised to get a second opinion, which I did. I went to see another specialist who explained things fully and told me why, due to the fact the tumour was right in the middle of my head, they simply couldn't risk operating.

"I had it more clear in my head and although I knew it was benign, it was still growing. I was advised not to have radiotherapy too early and to wait as long as possible which would give me a better chance."

However, eventually Helen was told the tumour had continued to grow and it was now time to undergo radiotherapy treatment.

She said: "I am quite claustrophobic so it was horrendous. I went to Clatterbridge every weekday for six weeks and the treatment took between 10 and 20 minutes.

"The problem is you have to be kept absolutely still. I was clamped down in the same position every day.

To make matters worse for Helen her beloved rescue dog, Sheba, had to be put to sleep the day before the radiotherapy treatment started.

She said: "Sheba was gorgeous, a collie Alsatian cross, she was 11 years old when I got her and 17 when she died. I had to take her to the vet and he said the only fair thing was to put her to sleep, I had to agree.

“Then the next day, still distraught, I am being clamped down for the radiotherapy. I didn’t dare cry and had to try desperately to think of something else. They zapped me through each temple and one through the top of my head.

“That way they could minimize the damage to healthy tissue. I only lost hair at the points the radiotherapy was administered so it wasn’t too bad really.”

Initially, she was trained as a therapeutic carer providing hand and hair care to elderly hospital patients as well as neck massage.

Going around wards at Colwyn Bay hospital, Helen would freshen the nails and hands of elderly patients.

She said: “My role was to sit and chat while I did their nails. It was nice being able to offer some companionship.”

However, unable to volunteer enough daytime hours due to her employment at Cartrefi Conwy, Helen swapped her nail file for a listening ear and now volunteers doing home visits to people in need.

Helen says she really enjoys the work which is an extension to the help provided by Social Services.

She said: “Some of the people I visit are really struggling to adjust and are so desperate for a little companionship.

“I love working for the Red Cross, it is such a respected organisation and being a volunteer you do get something out of it yourself, the feeling that you have done something worthwhile, it means a lot.”

Helen also does a little fundraising outside supermarkets where she can be found holding collection buckets for the Red Cross.

And she says she is often surprised just who is prepared to give to such a worthwhile cause.

She said: “Teenagers get such stick and bad press these days yet they are so generous. I have seen lads who you look at and think he’s trouble, or he’s a yob and yet they come straight over and make a donation, it’s really heart-warming.”

Now Helen is looking forward to many more years of volunteering after finally being discharged from Clatterbridge Hospital.

She said: “Fingers crossed everything will be fine now. The tumour has been stable for five years. I say it’s living rent free, but hey, you have to get on with life.

“I still get double vision and have to wear special glasses to drive. In fact I voluntarily gave up driving for six months but now, thanks to my glasses, I am legally able to drive and get out and about. I have got used to it.”

Cartrefi Conwy Chief Executive Andrew Bowden said: “Helen’s courage and devotion to others is a shining example to us all.

“Being invited to meet the Queen was a much deserved honour and we’re delighted that it was such a memorable occasion.”



Pictured: Helen Leigh before her meeting with the Queen.