

# Caring Café offers lifeline

Merton, Croydon to arrive over 40 and a Girl Guide will come to their face. They will recall the early television soap with its shaky sets and wobbly script that gripped the nation for much of its duration 24 year on from 1964.

Not many people know that a charity was in fact launched by the cat to provide support for carers (though they were probably not known by that term in the 1960s), that it is still going strong today under that title, Ann Kirby, a former BBC drama producer, who became the first woman president of Kew Gardens Rotary Club in 1997, chose it as her charity for her year of office and since then it has dominated her life.

"I was always aware of how much people who dedicated their lives to looking after elderly or sick relatives had to sacrifice and of the kind of problems they face," Ann, who married her own father for two years, points out.

The Caring Café, a spin off from the Croydon work, operating from Meadows Hall in Richmond, opened after her involvement in 2003 with the help of a lottery grant and a lot of work by a dedicated organising committee.

It has been a success story from day one and it so much impressed Francis Alexander who visited shortly after its inception that he called again last Sunday.

The fact Ann who lives in Bletchley Road, Barnes was attracted to the work of the society in the beginning a not without its irony.

She looked after her father who suffered from dementia in his sevenies and so knows exactly what a tough and lonely life it can be.

Yet it was her father, a comparatively wealthy businessman who owned a company which served Southfield Market,



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who retired to look after her when she had an opportunity to go to university – a bitter disappointment for a bright teenager who had many academic successes.

"It was not that he was a bad man", she stresses. "But at that time it was not what women did. He thought I got to secretarial college instead."

Yet at the end of his life it was Ann who had to care for him. Not that it stopped her having a varied and successful career. She

went from college to work for the Anglo Arab Association and from there to the BBC, where she moved from menial secretarial duties to be a powerful producer responsible for major drama series.

She employed the likes of Rod Taylor, Sir Michael Redgrave and Paul Scofield – completing a quarter of a century in broadcasting before she decided to move on to pastures new in 1980 and dabbled successfully in the world of antiques and porcelain restoration.

Now in her seventies, Ann – like so many of her generation – is going back in a big way. She is an active member of St Michael's Church, Barnes, a volunteer at Barnes Wetlands Centre and a trustee of the Caring Café which meets every Sunday.

"When we launched it we thought that people who were looking after downsized relatives might want to bring their car for a few hours to enjoy a break. In fact most of them just enjoy the day out and stay and meet others who are in the same situation and enjoy socialising.

"It is difficult to appreciate how isolated you become once you dedicate your life to looking after someone who cannot look after themselves," she points out.

"We employ six or seven people for the day – people with professional qualifications who can handle Alzheimer sufferers. We give them refreshments and advice and encouragement. And it has been a huge success.

"Of course we are also struggling to raise funds and organise assistance. But I find the work very fulfilling and I know it is vital. Even those of us who have had full and glamorous lives and pioneering careers have had some experience of looking after the elderly and infirm. So we know just how important a lifeline it."