

Volunteer Lives – Christine Dell – Chestnut Tree House

‘I don’t feel my age as I volunteer for a lot of events and plan to be a female Peter Pan for as long as possible,’ says Chris Dell with a smile. At 76, her volunteering journey is still going very strongly. Chris’s pathway into this type of work started in 2007 when her daughter, who was a manager at a bookmakers, received a letter from a mum who had a young child who was cared for at Chestnut Tree House, a children’s hospice in Arundel. Sadly he died during his stay at the house but her letter was full of praise for the organisation and the amazing, caring staff there.

‘My daughter knew of Chestnut Tree House as my grandson was at school with a youngster who received respite care at the house due to his life-limiting condition,’ Chris tells VAAC. ‘My daughter wanted to do something to raise money for the hospice so we organised a Race Night and made an incredible £2,000.’

Chris started volunteering at tombola stalls, bucket collections, 10k runs, wrapping Christmas presents and writing thank you cards. In 2012 she set up a Friends Group with her husband so that they could start running their own events. These included further Race Nights, stalls at various functions and street parties and they raised over £17,000.

‘I worked for a Lloyd’s broker and the company wanted to start a Corporate Social Responsibility initiative,’ Chris says. ‘It was up to the Sports and Social Club to choose a charity which could benefit from our fundraising efforts.’ As Chris was on the committee she invited a senior member of fundraising from Chestnut Tree House to come to one of their meetings and explain how they cared for all the children and young people who came to the hospice for respite and end of life care. ‘She also showed us a video of the children enjoying their stay at the house,’ Chris recalls. ‘There wasn’t a dry eye in the room and a unanimous decision was made to fundraise for the hospice.’

They held very successful charity days and Chris also applied for grants from Lloyd’s of London and Aviva, which came to £5,000, and she raised £1,156 from a tandem skydive. Chestnut Tree House introduced a Business Awards event so Chris applied for the Most Outstanding Fundraiser at her company and was delighted to win.

After leaving work she applied to Chestnut Tree House for the role of volunteer receptionist. ‘It was great to see the children and their families come to the house and the excitement on their faces,’ she says. Chris was invited to become a lead volunteer in 2022 so that she can run an event or just help out as usual. In terms of improvements to the volunteer experience, she says that they could always do with more volunteers at the events.

One of the numerous upsides of volunteering is that she has picked up a few new skills along the way. ‘I have stood up and talked to audiences quite a few times and discovered I can sell anything to anyone.’ The benefit her voluntary work brings to the community is crystal clear. ‘Children and young people who need this specialist care can have it at no cost to the families due to our fundraising efforts.’

She also plans to keep this rewarding journey going for a while longer. ‘I always say ‘there for the grace of God go I’ as I have two children, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren who are fit and well so I am counting my blessings,’ she comments. ‘I feel good that I can improve the lives of these adorable children and young people.’

Interview by Marcus Waring. Based in West Sussex, Marcus has worked as a travel and lifestyle journalist, editor and managing editor since 2000, with work ranging from travel features for national newspapers and magazines to running editorial teams and projects. www.marcuswaring.com.