

Elizabeth, fcJ



Journeying to the Heart

Since 2006 I've been connected in some way with those who are no longer able to look after themselves. I've worked as a Home Care worker cleaning six houses a day for one of our local city council while at the same time studying at University after my teaching career ended. I chose a Course called "Community Services: Lifestyle and Leisure". The Course entitled me to work in Nursing Homes as a Diversional Therapist. This was quite a career change from the classroom where I taught primary aged children for over 25 years. My name is Elizabeth Brown and I've been a faithful companion of Jesus since 1984. I live and work now in a rural country town called Benalla. It is situated in the north east of my state of Victoria, Australia. Benalla is known as the Rose City. Due to our freezing cold winters, the roses thrive and people come to see all the amazing blooms in the autumn and the spring.

Within the health care industry I've been able to offer a very simple gift which doesn't cost anything, a smile! I believe a smile breaks down any language or physical barrier. I also add another dimension to this role as a faithful companion of Jesus. This I truly believe enables me to bring Jesus into their world. I firmly believe that I have no right to force religion onto any of them, so I bring myself with all the love in my heart.

I've worked in many different nursing homes ranging from a 170 bed nursing home to a 32 bed dementia unit to where I am today, a 60 bed Aged Care facility. The majority of the residents in the 170 bed facility were all high care, suffering from some form of Dementia. At that facility they came from many faiths but the majority were Jewish. From there I moved overseas in 2009 to begin my Tertainship which is our third year of spiritual studies known as the "School of the Heart". I was privileged during this time to work with the Sisters of Nazareth in their Aged Care facility in Birkenhead, England whilst studying for my degree in Dementia Care and Services whilst overseas. Once again I was able to utilise my teaching skills through the role of Diversional therapist. Since my return home in 2012, I've been employed in 3 vastly different nursing homes, all involving contact with residents who are either frail, elderly or overwhelmed by their deteriorating health.

Now my present work sees me as a pastoral carer, still companioning with the elderly. This role also involves me making connections with the resident's family and staff.

“ I love this position and am amazed at how God has turned my life full circle from teaching little ones to now walking with those who have lived their lives to the full and need loving support as they journey through their last phase of life here on earth.

The scene in nursing homes has rapidly changed over the years with modern technology. Now we all clock in and out for our shifts. All our documentation is computerised. Since my shifts are now in blocks of four hours I average visiting 15 to 19 residents each day I'm on duty. I'm known as "Smiley" to the residents, families and staff. I've learnt along the way especially when I used to clean houses that the smile is the greatest gift one can offer.

I invite you now to take a walk around the 60 bed aged care facility. In my hand I carry a reserve of jokes in case a resident might need cheering up. The first person I see is "Bill". He's got a smile on his face as he has been granted a single room and no longer has to share. Little does he know I've been campaigning on his behalf. I do shopping for him as he has no immediate family nearby. When he first came to us, he was suicidal as he couldn't see in purpose in life anymore. That was 3 years ago. He's a changed man now and sits outside in the corridor so as to make contact with others. His interests in life revolved around Pomeranian dogs. Once you start him off on the topic of pets, his whole face lights up. I leave him and go into the day room. There is lovely Leila who came from interstate to us but originally grew up in Estonia. Her dementia has caused her to lose the use of speech. She is completely bed ridden but knows how to smile. I stand beside her princess chair and tell her the latest news and I end with a blessing. Through her grunts one knows she's delighted to receive this blessing. I often wonder what a life she must have had back home, especially during the war years. This will remain a secret with her now, forever.



Staff members go by and greetings are exchanged or I might share a joke with them. The senior nurse on duty comes to me with a request. So I wind my way around to that resident's room. I'm greeted by an elderly gentleman who is adjusting to being in a nursing home. His breathing is laboured so I try to do most of the talking. After a short while I leave as I realise he prefers his own company.

So whilst down that end of the corridor I go into Norman's room. He is unable to communicate but lights up with a simple joke. The joke is delivered and he laughs to himself. Next I entered Vi's room. She's only 98 years old and quite a character. Her life history pours out as she reminisces about how her mother always wondered if she'd turn out okay. Her mother needn't have worried. Having had no children of her own she dotes on her nieces and nephews who love her dearly. This was evident on her 98th birthday. She's lost her short term memory so each day truly is a new day and she always states with conviction, "I'm glad I've had a good life".

The next one I go to is 93 and is very hard of hearing. I love going into her as she feels comfortable in my presence and will often reminisce about her upbringing and her beloved Jim who predeceased her. She also receives a blessing as does each resident I visit who wishes. Ellen turns the blessing back onto me after she has received one. She loves my company as she feels the staff are too pressed for time and she feels she can talk to me about anything, as I can sit down and listen. I leave her admiring her deep faith in her God. Finally I go into Nancy's room. She loves a good joke and is able to catch onto them quickly. She came to us shortly after the death of her husband so I make a point to see how she is travelling as she's bed bound. Sometimes she gives me a joke in return.

Often I'll conduct a religious service for all those recently deceased. All the residents are wheeled in and tears are shed for ones that they knew as friends. I've sat with families as their loved ones are dying and offer a listening ear when needed or I'll attend the resident's funeral service.

“ My job as you can see, involves personal contact, one to one interactions, a listening heart, patience and most of all love. I feel the residents give me so much as they place their trust in me.

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It is like walking on the road to Emmaus, not fully realising that God is in our midst. Yet I know that God is in each and every one of these lovely people who are entering their final journey of life. **They have taught me that we all have a story to tell. Let us cherish what we can offer each other. This job allows me to be truly a faithful companion of Jesus.**



“ Jesus is our hope. Nothing—not even evil or death—is able to separate us from the saving power of his love. ”

Pope Francis

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