What is Shared Lives?

A Day in the Life of a Shared Lives carer...

Lots of people have never heard of Shared Lives before but it’s actually a form of support for adults that has been around for a long time. At Grace Eyre, our name is taken from Grace Eyre Woodhead, who not only founded the organisation in 1898 but also formed the first Shared Lives scheme in the UK. Better known is fostering which provides a service to children it does, however, have some similarities with Shared Lives.

Shared Lives is a service which provides care and support, skills development and guidance to adults that have particular support needs and is simply about ‘sharing’ your life with them. This may be someone who has learning disabilities or mental health needs, physical disabilities or older people. The service is provided by people who can offer accommodation and also have the skills and motivation to undertake this caring role within their home.

Being a Shared Lives Carer is a highly valued role, as care and support provided by these people means that many adults needing support are given an alternative to residential care. Living within a Shared Lives home means people who need some extra support can learn independence skills and live as part of their community in a natural home setting. Shared Lives Carers come from all sorts of backgrounds and may be single people living in a flat to families living in a house who have children of their own.

Below is an interview with one of our Shared Lives Carers, Jane and she talks about her role in supporting a young man, Johnny who has learning disabilities (names have been changed for privacy) and this gives a flavour of what the role is all about. Grace Eyre is currently recruiting for Shared Lives so if you would like to know more about this extraordinary paid role maybe as a career change or back to work idea, contact us for more details.

A Day in the Life of a Shared Lives Carer

Jane, let’s talk about a typical day in your role as Shared Lives Carer. What time do you get up?
I get up about 7.30am. Johnny gets up earlier and very kindly brings me a peppermint tea!

So what do you do both do first thing?
I get up and get ready. Johnny is very able and gets himself ready. I check he’s had a shower, make sure he’s taken his medication and I also just check that he’s got appropriate clothing on for the weather of the day, as sometimes he can misjudge this.

What do you have for your breakfast?
I get my own breakfast and I’ve been supporting Johnny to cook and make his own breakfast. So he’ll often have porridge, toast or something like that and once a week he makes himself a cooked breakfast – a full English!

What is your typical day like?
In the morning we’ll talk about Johnny’s plans for the day, where he’s going and what he’s doing. So some days he might be going to the day centre where he undertakes activities
such as going to the gym and going swimming – he loves keeping fit! He’s also got a volunteer job in a café.

When Johnny first came to stay he said he wanted to get out and do things such as volunteering so I supported Johnny to attend a Travel Training programme and after 2 years on the programme and me helping him practice his journeys, he is now an independent traveller. He has also become a volunteer travel buddy himself and supports other people with learning disabilities to learn to travel safely.

On the days Johnny doesn’t go to the centre, he goes to the local gym where he also has a volunteer job cleaning down the machines. Johnny also uses the gym himself. Afterwards he goes out for lunch with his work buddies and he loves doing this! He then normally goes to the library and gets his DVDs for the week.

Wednesday is Johnny’s cleaning day so in the afternoon, he’ll come home and do the hoovering, sweep the floors, clean the bathroom, tidy his room and change his sheets etc. I have developed an accessible visual tick list with pictures of household jobs so Johnny knows what he needs to do.

I normally get home about 4.30pm/5pm. Johnny likes to eat out, so he chooses one evening a week when we’ll go out to eat. There are lots of pubs and restaurants that do mid-week specials so he will choose one of those to keep costs down. On other evenings, Johnny might go out to see his friends. He has an accessible mobile phone to keep me posted on what his plans are so he can call if he’s going to stay at a friend’s for dinner.

**In your view, what is Shared Lives and what is its aim?**
For me it’s about supporting someone and having the patience to support someone to learn new skills in their own time. You want the person living with you to be as independent and a part of their community as much as possible. It also provides a natural realistic environment to live in and to learn new skills – so much better than a care home or residential care.

In order to help Johnny become part of his community, when he first moved in I took him to all the local shops and pubs and anywhere Johnny would be interested in going and introduced him to the people working there. We developed relationships with local amenities and businesses. I also left my phone number with them, in case he got lost and came to them for help so they could call me. I now feel that he has a good safety net. He can go to the pub with his friends and I know the landlord will call me if there’s any problem.

**When, why and how did you become a Shared Lives carer?**
I became a Shared Lives Carer a few years ago now. I was working within special needs and I saw first-hand what happened to a poor gentleman with learning disabilities who lost his mother. Within a matter of days he lost everything, his mother, his home and every bit of security he had previously known. It was a terrible situation and I really felt for this gentleman. The charity I worked for ran a Shared Lives scheme and I decided to look into becoming a Shared Lives Carer and here I am a few years down the line living with Johnny.

**What skills do you need to become a Shared Lives Carer?**
Many are skills you can learn but the key ones are: understanding and patience. You really need to understand the long term commitment and you also need a genuine interest in seeing someone develop. You need to get to grips with the processes and paperwork but if
you apply to be a Shared Lives Carer, Grace Eyre will give you comprehensive training to fully prepare you for the role, so there's nothing to fear. They also offer update training throughout the year and can sometimes match you up with a more experienced carer to mentor you through the first few months. I also attend Carer meetings, which Grace Eyre run, as making links with other experienced carers can be really helpful.

**What are the benefits of Shared Lives to the person living with you?**
It’s great for Johnny because he’s able to have 1:1 time, we're similar ages so we actually have a lot in common and have similar interests. I’m really lucky as my friends and family have totally accepted Johnny as part of my life and he gets invited to as many nights out as me! My male friends take Johnny to football – they’ve recently bought him a ticket to go and see Chelsea play - his dream come true! A key benefit is living in a normal everyday environment and being able to do everyday things that most of us take for granted, as that is truly living your life.

**Would you recommend being a Shared Lives Carer as a professional role?**
Definitely! It’s a highly rewarding job and I’ve really benefitted too - I’ve made a firm friend! I’m paid for my role, but I also undertake other work too. When I started my role as Shared Lives Carer I spent a lot of time and energy into setting up the right support networks for Johnny, learning to travel, links in the community, daily activities etc. Because Johnny is so much more independent now, I can also take on other part-time work.

If you would like to know more about this extraordinary paid role maybe as a career change or back to work idea, contact us for more details, we are currently recruiting Shared Lives Carers across Sussex and the South East.

**Sussex: 01273 201903**, or email sharedlives@grace-eyre.org, **Lambeth: 0207 924 0631** or **Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster: 0207 924 0631**