As part of the National Council for Palliative Care / Dying Matter’s Coalition programme of joint projects with schools and hospices, we matched five students from Mossbourne Community Academy with six day patients from St Joseph’s Hospice in Hackney. For five weeks the students; Michael, Shedah, Buket, Jade and Barney spent the afternoon with six patients; Jean, Beryl, Nellie, Edward, Kim and Lillian. Their only remit was to talk and find out about each other’s lives, what makes them who they are, their hopes and fears and perhaps challenge their views of one another’s generations. The following accounts detail their experiences along the way.

Sam Turner
Head of Development, NCPC
Week 1: The Beginning

St Joseph’s Hospice was everything that I thought it was – scary and unfamiliar. Not! I would be telling a complete lie if I described the hospice as anything negative.

Ok – fair enough – when I first walked into the hospice two weeks ago when I had no sort of knowledge whatsoever with regards to who I was meeting and where I was going, I was a bit apprehensive. But then I realised I do tend to over exaggerate things! Every time I go somewhere new, I end up being nervous or scared.

First I’d like to say that the short 30 minutes I had with Nellie flew by. I learned so much about her in only half an hour that I was truly shocked!

I feel so guilty though! She told me about her journey from Barbados to Southampton when she was 18 years old in 1961, and about the ship, MV Sorrento, that she travelled here in. She travelled here with the smallest suitcase ever – “it contained all my worldly possessions” – and, just from that little suitcase, Nellie built her life in the UK – amazing, don’t you agree?

I got to ask all the questions that I had always been too shy to ask in the past! For example, Nellie explained ostent to me – it actually is an Ox’s tail, you know! It’s got meat on it! As stupid as it may sound, I felt comfortable around her almost instantly. Surely you can’t click with someone that easily? But we did!

We also found a common ground – the cuisine of our original countries! Nellie is from Barbados, and I could feel my mouth salivating when she was telling me about her favourite dishes! Yams, sweet potatoes, rice – starchy food that us Iranians absolutely adore.

One of the most common dishes was said to be “flying fish” in Barbados. I was perplexed... do these fish actually fly? - “yes, they do!” she said and then explained that nets may be used to catch them in mid-air! One of things I also learned was how different their dishes were!

They had pickled meat with okra (or lady fingers, as Nellie said) with cucumbers! Such a rich variety of ingredients creating beautiful tastes.

When the conversation shifted to how Hackney has changed over the time, Nellie told me about one of the most frightening experiences she had been through. She had almost been mugged by a man who was following her:

“You know when you have that sixth sense? When someone’s following you – I just remembered that I hadn’t told my daughter something so I said out loud ‘Oh... I’ve forgotten to tell her something!’ and when I turned around I saw a man looking at me, then he walked into the alley, and came back out again. I walked into the police station – never again did I wear gold jewellery!”

“Despite the fact that she had been through so much, Nellie is always smiling!”

Week 2: A Friendship?

Today, Nellie brought in her suitcase that she had told me so much about. It was a tiny, navy little suitcase which she said once contained all her worldly goods.” It was what she brought with her when she first docked in Southampton in 1961 as she left her old life in Barbados to start a fresh in England with her late ex-husband “Mr Knight.”

“I remember writing a postcard to my mother telling her the sun don’t shine over here – she never replied.”

Nellie’s account of her journey from Southampton to England made me realise how strong a woman she truly is. I tell no lie – I could feel my throat swelling up when she told me her stories but I knew that crying was out of the question. I think being strong, as a doctor or palliative care nurse, is incredibly important if the relationship you aim to develop with a patient is one whereby they feel comfortable around you.

One thing I learned is that a career in medicine will not be easy. You will face situations where you develop such a close bond or your empathy skills are so enhanced that you can almost feel sorry for every single one of your patients – and this will be a barrier that every prospective doctor will, one day, have to overcome. It never gets any easier, but it may get easier to deal with.

So when Nellie told me about her fall on the ship, I kept my tears back and went to hug her as she unravelled painful memories of her past:

“I had never been on a ship before, so I didn’t know the steps were so steep! So I was walking down with my briefcase at the front of a big queue of people, when I just fell and everyone else fell on top of me. I had bust my lip open and was left unconscious for some time... I remember waking up and all these men in white coats were standing around me.”

Despite the fact that she had been through so much, Nellie is always smiling! So I think she has always been a hard worker who deserves the best.

Nellie also told me that when she used to live in Barbados, black people would always be servants to the white people. So what was the best thing about coming to England, I asked her?

She laughed, and replied, “the best thing was seeing white people do their own laundry and do their own shopping. Back at home they didn’t do anything... so it was like... you know... good for them. They aren’t all the same and they can do their own stuff.”

I could sit here all day, telling you everything we talked about – but I’m not going to. Because, from just a small insight, you can gain so much more than if you read a script of our entire conversation! To end the session, Nellie told me about when she got pregnant, and how it startled her that a male doctor had lifted up her top when she had gone into labour.

“I whacked his hand away,” she laughed, “because I didn’t know what he was doing! I told him not to look at me! Mr Knight called me silly, and said he’s a doctor and he’s trying to help...”
Week 3: Spirituality

This week was, dare I say it, weird? I gained a deep insight into Nellie’s fears and how she used to be scared of death and anything to do with death. She told me about dreams that she would have of dying people coming to her and moments where she saw spirits and talked to them.

When Churchill died, she had dreams of him coming to her sleep and entering her room through the door. “But I’m not scared anymore,” she said, “because I’ve learned to deal with it.”

I guess it never gets easy to deal with grief – “I still miss my mother very much. She was wearing my clothes in that picture,” she laughed.

“Why are you no longer scared of dying, Nellie?” I had asked.

She told me that, when she goes to bed, she would just say “Lord, I am in your hands.”

The dreams that Nellie has, in a way, has made her more conscious of the fact that there may actually be an after life. She said she doesn’t know how to explain it, but, in a way, the presence of spirits around her has “made her a better person; not because of punishments in an after life... but just because you just can’t seem to do any wrong to others around you.”

Week by week, I seem to be gaining more and more respect for Nellie. Is there a limit to this? I’m not sure. But one thing I am beginning to slowly become interested in is this – maybe there is a future for me in palliative care. Maybe I want to specialise as a doctor in a hospice? I’m not sure. But for now I’m just glad to be able to meet Nellie on a weekly basis.

Week 4: Summary

Today was absolutely amazing. We finally managed to get a few pictures of Nellie with her photo album and suitcase, and I also managed to ask her 17 questions and record it on film! Amazing 😊

I think the thing that touched me the most was when Nellie answered to one of the questions that she wish she could have her health back. Despite my strong face, deep down I could feel my heart melting but as tears formed in the corner of Nellie’s eye, I knew that I had to maintain composure to stop the session from becoming a dreadful one!

This week was mainly spent discussing Nellie’s past and comparing it to how things are different today. I guess we can split the session up into three main bits: the job market, products and also the police.

We discussed Nellie’s first job ever – she worked in a steak and kidney pie factory!

But she had to leave her job when she fell pregnant and the smell of “runny egg from nearby” made her feel sick.

“But it was different back then you know? You could get 3 or 4 jobs in one day so finding a job was really easy...”

“And there was very little government support – you wouldn’t be given money when you were out of a job, you’d be given a job...”

Nellie, having such a good memory, also remembers paying “£18 and 10 shillings for a sewing machine...”

She remembers using it to make a skirt which she didn’t measure properly, so it wouldn’t go past her hip! It’s a shame really because the pattern of the material was so lovely – it was a piece of a material with a strip at the bottom, filled with images of rock and roll artists and images.

Being the kind-hearted woman she was, she donated the sewing machine to St Michael’s Church.

“I made all of Jennifer’s dress’ on that sewing machine... my cousin’s mum loved me because I was so good at it. She said I admire Helen’s daughter, because she’s always interested in doing things.”

Jennifer is one of Nellie’s daughters and Helen is her late mother.

And on that note, we began to reminisce on Nellie’s relationship with her mother.

She said that her mother never understood the issues that she was facing in England. When she wanted to divorce Mr Knight, she wrote to her mum who replied – “no, don’t do it...”

“When I divorced him he didn’t leave- he told me to leave, so I did, and I took the kids with me. I remember Mr Knight saying to me on a Sunday morning when we were going to church ‘Oh, I need to buy petrol or clean the car’ and I would say ‘take the girls with you’ but he’d say ‘I would if they were boys.’ And I was thinking so what? They’re your kids still...”

It is obvious that Nellie has been through so much – and because of that, she is a stronger woman. Despite how Mr Knight may have treated her, they still remained friends after the divorce and she said to herself “One day, He’ll need me so I’ll show him that I’m not like him.”

When Mr Knight was hospitalised, she’d go to Homerton hospital and cook food for him and bathe him.

“The Police wouldn’t do anything to help with my husband – they’d just say go back home to your husband lady... But it’s all different now. I was so happy when woman’s rights came out...” she said as she smiled, crossing her fingers as an act to show that she remembered wishing for it every day.
**Week 1**

Unexpected. That was definitely the word of the day. The hospice was nothing that I thought it would be. Previously, I had never been to one and had by the end of the day realised my misconceptions were so terribly wrong. I'm not quite sure what I was expecting, but it was certainly along the lines of 'really gloomy and rather depressing' - but I was genuinely amazed by the sheer friendliness and caring attitudes of the staff and even the patients.

I was 'paired up' with Edward, an over-six-foot tall gentleman in his eighties and despite his size was quite a humble and quiet character. A week back before the pairings we visited the hospice and I specifically remember him sitting on one of the mid-located single couches listening to the buzz of the hospice - staff chatting to patients, patients conversing with each other, our group presenting the project. He didn’t say much and was not as extroverted as the other patients, but there was something about his quiet aura that sparked intrigue... he looked like a man of many stories.

We entered the therapy room where we would be having our weekly ‘talks’, and there I was, absolutely no notes in hand and rather nervous. The member of staff (presumably there for some moral support) and Edward looked at me expectantly as if I had some sort of speech prepared and I knew exactly what I was going to say. So I did what I’ve always done – fluke it. I introduced myself in the most confident manor I could muster and asked the first appropriate question that came to mind: how has Hackney changed throughout the years you’ve been here?

Edward thought for while and replied, “your generation has a greater chance of getting a better education and you have more money in your pockets,” and after a pause “also you don’t have to work at 14 years of age”.

Hold on a minute? Work at 14? I was still doing SATS. It’s mind-blowing to think how much things have changed.

I asked him what he was like at school. “I used to fight a lot. I was quick tempered.” My preconceptions were confirmed – Edward was a character, but not only that – he was also very easy-going, you could tell by the way he spoke or even sat! He started to laugh and look at the floor, probably conjuring up some memories of his days at school.

“Anyone in particular?” I asked.

“Yeah, there was this one kid who would boast to everyone about how rich he was and how he had the best shoes, he was middle class you see and his dad was some sort of businessman. He and I always fought, all the time.” We both laughed and I also felt sorry for the poor guy on the receiving end of Edward’s ‘beatings’.

Edward’s golden advice: “Got to behave yourself when you’re married”

Edward got married in North London in 1953 at 23 years old. Back then, it was a tradition or you would be a ‘sinner’ – I can’t imagine many people in society nowadays proclaiming this, just goes to show what a long way people have come.

When I had told him he seemed like quite a calm, easy-going person he replied “Got to be content if you want to live”. Where was the worry and the fear that I had expected from a hospice patient? I knew he was there for some sort of health condition but it seemed as though he wasn’t even phased by it. Was this just on the surface sugar-coating or was it genuine? It appeared to a certain extent that he had come to terms with his condition, but even if he hasn’t, would I ever find out his fears and preoccupations?

Number one advice for our generation: “Keep your nose clean” he replied, in a true east-end fashion.

Edward in a nutshell: Supports the labour party.

He isn’t religious, though he does believe in God.

Favourite movie: The Godfather – a favourite among many.

Doesn’t watch any soaps other than ‘heartbeat’.

He used to be part of the ‘Mile end boys’ where they would “wander the streets”. Occasionally if they came across other gangs they would fight. He remembers one in particular called the Stepney Green Boys. “Sometimes the old Bill would come along and stop us.” Edward looks like he must’ve had a pretty mean left hook – he’s relatively tall and was apparently quite muscular back in the day.

We spoke about music and after I told him some of the artists of my generation he didn’t know quite a few and laughed at some of the more eccentric names like ‘Lady Gaga’). I asked about some of his favourite genres and artists. “Jazz... Oscar Peterson” he replied.

Jazz? Pretty cool, I thought, because firstly, I didn’t really associate Edward with music & I don’t know, I suppose you just don’t really think of people his age listening to music in the way our generation does today – it sound rather naive, but it’s true. I suddenly had a flash of him bonging out Lady Gaga or Britney tunes full blast and mentally giggled).

“How do you feel about Eastenders?”

“Ah, rubbish, nothing like the East End I used to know” I suppose he meant all the overly dramatised deaths and shenanigans that Albert square has become famous for – which presumably never happened in the East End he grew up in. “There was much less crime back in the day.”

I asked him about drugs and he told me only the upper class could afford them. Although he does recall a time when a checker colleague at the Docks offered him some marijuana... he tried it but couldn’t really find the attraction of it in the long term. “I stuck to cigarettes... not really my thing you know.” Wow pretty different then, I mean drugs are everywhere nowadays, and it’s surprising how many people can get access to them, not just the upper-class like it was in Edward’s day.

Did you know Edward worked at one of the very first Nestle factories? After he left his national service in the army in his twenties, he went to the countryside and got a job at good ol’ Nestle. He told me the factories were pretty much manual – he done the entire packaging etc by hand- not machine operated they are now – again, another massive change.

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**Week 2**

There was progress this week. Our talks were evolving from the mundane style of question and answer ‘sessions’ into proper conversations. I felt like he was – dare I say it – a friend. Someone I could have a ‘no-baggage’ chat with – two complete strangers sharing their views and opinions on society, life and even death. It was different and interesting to say the least.

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Week 3: 17 questions!

This week the chance to ask Edward some interesting and thought-provoking questions, but also on the other hand, some that were much more light-hearted (in which I was relieved, I don’t think Edward or I would have been up for anything too melancholic – it seemed that we were similar in our preference for laughing and general ‘cheeriness’).

“What do you think makes a good doctor?”

“Doctors who can make a little bit of time to talk to patients and ask them how they’re doing. Doctors who don’t make you feel as though they want to get rid of you.” He replied, with sincerity.

I asked him how he was with his GP. “Oh he’s been brilliant”. He went on to tell me about how his doctor has been more than supportive throughout his condition.

I felt it was the right moment to ask him what his ‘condition’ was and presumably the reason why he was at the hospice. “The doctors at the hospital in Whitechapel diagnosed me with end stage heart failure”, he answered, completely in his normal tone – there were no pauses or tears, which I found quite surprising. It was an odd feeling that this lovely man, so vibrant, cheerful and certainly living was, in technical terms, dying. His body was failing - but this was no reason to say that his mind or the experiences accumulated for the past eighty years of his life were withering too. Certainly not. He was alive – and this was the way I chose to think about it. It was at that moment that I realised we could learn so much from Edward: his happiness, his bravery and the most admirable - his acceptance of life… and death. Why are we so scared of it?

“Dying” he said, “I know I’m going to die, though not too soon… but there’s nothing I can do about it”. I suppose even after the acceptance of knowing death is approaching, there’s always some sort of helplessness of yielding to the figure portrayed in literature as wearing that iconic black hooded cloak, closely holding a scythe.

Week 4

Back in 1947 when Edward was 17, Saturdays consisted of: going to the local baths in the morning, coming home and having some pie and mash then going with mates to play some football. One thing that struck me the most was that, with every activity there was a sense of ‘community’, everything was done with friends or family. Nowadays, I think people are much more individualistic and privacy is definitely a ‘necessity’.

“No, we didn’t have en-suite bathrooms – the house didn’t consist of quickly turning up the thermostat.

“If you were prime minister for a day, what one thing would you change Edward?”

“I’d try changing all this animosity into peace. Everyone should live together happily, because at the end of the day we’re all human, it doesn’t matter what you look like or the colour of your skin.” Well, I don’t know about you, but he would have my vote!

Week 5

This week was our last ever chat sessions at the hospice and we decided to have some sort of a group discussion with everyone involved in the project. We took some photos, laughed and talked about how amazing the experience had been for everyone. We all found ourselves really pleased with the outcomes and friendships gained from the project. Edward made a few points on how he’s really enjoyed the conversations we’ve had, but for the most part he was humbly quiet like he usually was. He asked me if I would come back again, and I told him I definitely would. I don’t think not-comeing back was an option, I had gotten used to our chat sessions very much.

The experience has been so worthwhile: my misconceptions surrounding hospices completely disproven, seeing the friendly staff every Wednesday, but most of all getting to know a brave and almost –dare I say it – legendary character like Edward. I hope we can all learn from his fearless, bold and love-of-life attitude.
In fact, an undetonated head of a bomb is kept in Beryl’s house, but it’s used as a door stop! I also learnt about the dad’s army, which was where the dads of families were home guards of the British borders, but they didn’t actually do anything. “They had all their fancy rifles on show” said Jean, “But not a bullet between them!”

But when the war finally ended, the country became a party. Jean said, “There were bonfires and street parties every night and it was all a good time. There was just so much relief in the community and the war actually brought people together. It created a bond in society to let us know that we were all in it together. After the war though, people eventually began to drift apart.”

They went on to sing “We’ll meet again” by Dame Vera Lynn, which became the anthem on the war, as Lynn entertained the soldiers and reminded the public that it would all be over, and life would be okay. When I got home and unpinned my poppy from my blazer, I realised how much it meant to simply have a thought for the brave men who fought for this country.

Week 1

“As I heard those faint lyrics quietly sung by the patients in front of me, I realised that this wasn’t what I expected. But everyone’s going to say that. With pen in hand and a nervous sweat dripping from my brow, anyone can fear the awkward silences of being placed in a room with two women you hardly know and made to talk about life (Now that’s a big topic for a 17 year old to cover with two women with nearly five times as much experience of it).

Beryl, the shy lady with glasses so thick her eyes turn to saucers, hummed that classic tune as a way to remember my name, and I was immediately put at ease. It wasn’t long before conversation began to flow and I learned that both Beryl and the other lady, Jean, are 77 years old, and grew up here in London most their lives. Moving on to what this meeting is meant to be about, I asked them what they were like when they were my age.

“When I was 17, I thought I could rule the world!” proclaimed Jean, adjusting her wheelchair. After we chuckled at that remark, I realised that both Jean and Beryl had rather similar childhoods. For both of them, WWII began when they were six, and then they both had to leave school at 14 and go straight into work, with Jean at a dressmaker doing alterations and Beryl working in one of the first Co-op’s here. “But it wasn’t all work,” corrected Beryl. “Even with working five days a week I still found the time for a boyfriend, to go out to dances with or to go see the pictures.”

“I think back then we were more content with life,” said Jean. “Not like the children of today, I feel sorry for some of them. They aim to be famous but expect it to be simply handed to them. They rely on things like the X-Factor and it means everything to them. But when I see them on TV with their scarves off all over here, I just wonder, what am I subjecting myself to?”

But surely it’s not entirely their fault if some of today’s teens are fame hungry or simply lazy. “Well, I guess not,” she continued “I mean not all young people are like that, but that is what’s portrayed in the media. Sometimes these children don’t want to help the community simply because they weren’t loved.”

It was interesting to hear a different generation’s perception of 17 year olds today. Though not all young people are slabs who simply strive for celebrity status with absolutely no effort, no talent and no deodorant, it is a portrayed stereotype in the media and is true for some individuals out there. It just seems odd now to leave straight from school at 14, into manual work, where you learn hands on the lessons of the trade, but that’s how it was for them. I guess I’m not completely innocent in presumptions as I thought that these women must have been workaholics in their teenage years, but they still found ways to go out and enjoy themselves, even if it was a sneaky date out at the local cinema.

Details weren’t truly needed as she went on to say how a neighbour on her street was a victim of this. Hearing them talk about it helped me realise what this day was meant to be about. Having first hand experience of speaking to a victim of the war made me understand the importance of it more than the basic Key Stage 3 History knowledge had ever done. “The skies were usually alight with red from the flares of the bombs,” she said. “You would hear the bombs overhead, but in the shelter you would have no idea of where they’d land. People would take shelter in the underground stations, and in the morning, you would still feel the warmth from the metal scattered around their gardens.”

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Week 2

“Today was November the 11th, Remembrance Day. So walking in, poppy proudly on show on my lapel, I knew that this would be a topic that Jean and Beryl had had first hand experience in.

From last week, I remember that the war started when they were both six. It must have been such a huge event and obstruction to their childhoods. “It was scary” Jean admitted “people were being evacuated to different parts of the country and the terror was always in the back of your mind that you may never make it to tomorrow. But being six, it never really affected us as we didn’t think that far ahead.”

“They were okay to protect you from things like shrapnel and debris,” added Beryl “But if there was a direct hit then...”

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Details weren’t truly needed as she went on to say how a neighbour on her street was a victim of this. Hearing them talk about it helped me realise what this day was meant to be about. Having first hand experience of speaking to a victim of the war made me understand the importance of it more than the basic Key Stage 3 History knowledge had ever done. “The skies were usually alight with red from the flares of the bombs,” she said. “You would hear the bombs overhead, but in the shelter you would have no idea of where they’d land. People would take shelter in the underground stations, and in the morning, you would still feel the warmth from the metal scattered around their gardens.”

In fact, an undetonated head of a bomb is kept in Beryl’s house, but it’s used as a door stop! I also learnt about the dad’s army, which was where the dads of families were home guards of the British borders, but they didn’t actually do anything. “They had all their fancy rifles on show” said Jean, “But not a bullet between them!”

But surely it’s not entirely their fault if some of today’s teens are fame hungry or simply lazy. “Well, I guess not,” she continued “I mean not all young people are like that, but that is what’s portrayed in the media. Sometimes these children don’t want to help the community simply because they weren’t loved.”

It was interesting to hear a different generation’s perception of 17 year olds today. Though not all young people are slabs who simply strive for celebrity status with absolutely no effort, no talent and no deodorant, it is a portrayed stereotype in the media and is true for some individuals out there. It just seems odd now to leave straight from school at 14, into manual work, where you learn hands on the lessons of the trade, but that’s how it was for them. I guess I’m not completely innocent in presumptions as I thought that these women must have been workaholics in their teenage years, but they still found ways to go out and enjoy themselves, even if it was a sneaky date out at the local cinema.
“Week 3

“Umm...”

They furrowed their brows and looked questioningly around the room.

There was a pause for silence.

But can you blame them? For you see, not even a few minutes ago I had asked them the almighty question of “When was the happiest time of your life?” I mean, I doubt a lot of people can immediately come up with a suitable answer on the spot; I know I couldn’t and life hasn’t been that long or even that eventful for me! Sitting there looking at my questions, I saw that it’s actually really difficult to talk about everything and nothing in practically no time.

“Well, you see, it’s difficult to pick only one. I mean for both of us there’s the war ending.”

“Oh, yes, and when we met our husbands and got married...”

But eventually, Jean concluded, “Well, I guess the birth of my two children was one of the happiest times of my life, and so is every second I spend with them. My daughter’s the one that takes care of me and makes sure I’m alright and I appreciate it so much! Even if it’s just sitting down reading or listening to the radio. In fact, the other day we were doing just that and I just began to feel so sad!”

I later found out that what came on the radio was in fact a range of melodies from the David Jacobs Collection. This was a range of songs that Jean’s dad loved and used to play all the time on the piano. “Just hearing those few notes strung together brings out so much emotion that you didn’t know was inside you. But thank God I had my wonderful daughter there to support me.”

Beryl completely understood as she told us about how her mother died when Beryl was just 18. “I don’t know if you knew, but my wonderful mother used to sit down, have a cup of tea with, and talk about whatever you may can do wonders and it shouldn’t be overlooked.”

Sea and sand. Gosh, I remember Ibiza being so beautiful, warm and friendly.” When she said this, I couldn’t help thinking about what Ibiza has turned into now and wondered if Beryl would still appreciate it. I guess thumping club mixes and dubstep isn’t her cup of tea.

“Having that impartial person to sit down, have a cup of tea with, and talk about whatever you may can do wonders and it shouldn’t be overlooked.”

Unfortunately, Beryl felt another great loss as her sister died at the age of 43. As she couldn’t have children herself, she decided to take care of her sister’s son, Sean, and her daughter, Ilene. “It was hard though. Sean was okay because he was just a baby, but Ilene was nearly 9 and kept asking to ‘go see mummy and rabbit!’ and I hated trying to explain why they couldn’t see their mummy or their pet rabbit. I tried to make it better by taking them on trips, like when we went to Majorca, but that didn’t go too well. When we got there, Ilene’s suitcase went missing and it became a miserable start to a holiday.”

Trying not to let us all dwell in what must have been a sad moment in time, Jean asked if Beryl still keeps in touch with her children. “Well Ilene’s got her own life now, but Sean’s still around. I make sure I feed him well and he’s a pleasure to speak to, but it gets terribly lonely when Sean’s away on holiday or business. It feels like I have no one to talk to.”

That’s when I realised what these sessions are all about. I understood that sometimes, it’s nice just to talk about anything and that we should never underestimate the power of just an open ear for someone to talk to. Having that impartial person to sit down, have a cup of tea with, and talk about whatever you may can do wonders and it shouldn’t be overlooked.

So that’s what we did. For the rest of the day, we talked about sun and sand, about laundrettes and clothes, about everything, and about nothing.
Week 1
Unfortunately I arrived half an hour late for my first session with Lillian. I think all of us, like most people I would expect, first entered the hospice imagining it to be a bit of a depressing place to go. Sometimes you need to see it to believe it, but I couldn’t have been more wrong. We had been introduced a few weeks previously and she and one of the nurses in the day hospice were waiting for me. Fortunately for me, Lillian is gifted with a confidence in conversation that I do not, yet, possess. We began discussing small parts of her 61 years of marriage; Lillian had met her husband whilst working as a machinist during the war in Woolwich, having left school at 14 and having also worked as a waitress in a Lyons tea room. He, being an engineer like her father, was her foreman. They married on the 19th of February 1944.

Surprisingly, cheerfully, Lillian remembered mentioning to him “I pity the girl that gets you”. Her ability to operate a micrometer was what drew them together.

Lillian grew up in East ham, looking after her younger sister. The pair of them left home when Lillian was 17, as her brothers were fighting in WWII. Though it was not the war that led to one of the three getting shot. An accident involving a fairground rifle range called Lillian’s parents to Scotland for some time, an injury that persisted for some time. Even after only twenty minutes together, I left St. Josephs very much looking forward to next week’s conversation though slightly worried after realising I would have to talk about myself and, even more so, write this blog.
My next question brought us on to the war. Asking what life in the war was like I got a rather surprising answer: ‘Nothing happened’. It wasn’t until about 16 months in that the bombing started, which itself was fine. Lillian had ‘no fear’, not until she’d given birth to her first child. Whilst in labour in the hospital she heard the noise of a ‘doodlebug’ overhead. The low flying rockets were safe whilst you could hear their sound. It went off just over the river blowing out all of the windows in the room.

‘What’s the best piece of advice you’ve ever been given?’

‘If you can’t say anything nice, say nothing at all’.

‘Who do you most admire?’

Both Nelson Mandela and the Queen appeared here, though Lillian’s admiration doesn’t spread to the princes, or some other members of younger generations, who have gone ‘off the rails’, with everything made too easy. I’d never really thought about this before, but in many ways it’s true, life for young people has changed a lot over the last few decades.

‘What does spirituality mean to you?’

Lillian’s faith, in Christianity, has been and still is very important to her. Going to church is still a big part of her life, and she remembers being the first person their new vicar met when she was moving into the area. Her faith has ‘no fear’, and she remembers being the first person their new vicar met when she was moving into the area. For our last session, we decided to bring all of the groups together. In a circle we, patients and students, discussed the project, something many of us felt should be compulsory for all people of my age. We also discussed what we thought of St. Josephs, all of it good, especially compared to some of the hospitals I heard about.

I’ve found visiting the hospice on a Wednesday to be one of the highlights of my week, though that wasn’t true at the start; the idea of trying to start up a conversation with a complete stranger stressed me out for weeks as did writing this blog. Spending some time learning about someone else’s life and listening to what they have to say is a useful and interesting experience. You really get scope of how little someone who’s 16 or 17 years old actually knows, no matter how much we disagree. And I now really look forward to whatever it is my life has in store for me. I want to wish Lillian the best and I hope we can keep in touch for a long time to come.

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Thinking about this project, I do apprehend certain things happening, and feel very strongly that the direction of this project is to help the patient as well as inform the students. I think it is difficult for a person to talk to a stranger about their own experiences, and feel privileged to think that this may occur. However, I am looking forward to spending time with a patient, and think that they are all strong people to talk about sensitive information to people they do not know.

To be honest, I am not 100% sure as to what to expect. As a child I have had family members with terminal illnesses, so I have had previous experience with hospices as well as particularly ill people. However, each case is individual and should not be treated lightly, as terminal illness is a hindrance, but it doesn’t define a person, it only limits one’s ability in certain ways.

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"If you can’t say anything nice, say nothing at all."

Blog 1: Introduction

My name is Jade Kemp and I am currently working with a group of students on a project with the National Council for Palliative Care (NCPC). We will be spending time at St Joseph’s Hospice which is located in Hackney, London and talking to some of the outpatients there about different topics. The main one of these concerns the similarities and the differences between when they were 17 and the current time, including teen culture, as all the students doing this project are around 17.

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To be honest, I am not 100% sure as to what to expect. As a child I have had family members with terminal illnesses, so I have had previous experience with hospices as well as particularly ill people. However, each case is individual and should not be treated lightly, as terminal illness is a hindrance, but it doesn’t define a person, it only limits one’s ability in certain ways.

Blog 2: Meeting Kim

After being introduced to Kim for the first time I could see the physical side to her illness straight away. She was in a wheelchair and had tubes attached to her nose. I was surprised, but not shocked at this, as it is normal for patients to have problems with their breathing. After talking to Kim, I realised that she was a strong person, stronger than others. She has had a life more unfortunate than most, and as she talked about her childhood, and the difficulties that she had, I felt a barrier being broken between the two of us as we had both shared this same kind of misfortune. I could take up pages talking about Kim’s past, and the troubles she had growing up, but I feel that this isn’t really the time or place to talk about such tragedies, I think it is important to concentrate on the positive aspects of Kim’s life.

Kim’s profile

She was born in 1964, making her 45 years young, being the third of four children; she had to live with her brothers Neil, Dean and Craig as well as her parents. Growing up in the 80’s, she had a colourful wardrobe to go with her equally vibrant personality. She had three children relatively young, and was married in 1992 to her husband, where they had a fourth child, Paula who lives with them currently. Kim is still with her husband today, and takes turns keeping seven year old Paula on her toes.

When we were talking about interests, music came up. Kim told me that she liked a lot of stuff, whatever sounded good; however, she hates jazz!

Kim’s medical background

Kim suffers from coronary obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). This means that she has problems with her airways and her lungs. Earlier this year, she had a stroke. This is a very serious attack, and could have been disastrous to her health. It took many weeks of therapy to get her healthy again, but this just shows how strong she is!

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Blog 3: 17 again

So what was life in the 80’s? Big hair and giant shoulder pads? Just one of the many fads indeed. Talking to Kim, she talked about riding on the buses all night long. At the tender age of 17 she began to rebel against society, especially against her parents. This is nothing special to a teenager in the 21st century, but soon became the norm in 1980’s teen culture. Both eras are similar in the way that young people both idolise the famous and the popular and seek to be like their idols. Looking at the history of the 80’s, it is notorious for its music and fashion culture, much as is the case today within modern teen society.

The main difference between me and Kim is that she had already left school and had got a job, so this gave her independence and allowed her to grow up more, compared to me, as I am still in full time education and depend on my parents for funding. This seemed like the norm in both situations.

“Talking to Kim, she has been to four different hospitals and in only one of them has she been treated with respect.”

Blog 4: Who’s a good doctor then?

Talking to Kim, she has been to four different hospitals and in only one of them has she been treated with respect. She told me that a good place of medicine needs good doctors. Someone who will listen and treat all patients with respect. She said that she would rather be in a hospice than a hospital as it is a lot more friendly, and went on to explain how St Joseph’s made her feel so comfortable and welcomed. From visiting St Joseph’s I could understand the warmth she felt, as the sense of community was great, and I was surprised at how everyone was so friendly to one another. The staff are really pleasant and nothing like the media portrays nurses/other hospital staff. It’s a shame that the good work of these people go unnoticed, as they do a wonderful job. This may be the case that talking about improving hospices is a taboo as talking about dying is something that is socially not acknowledged.

Personally, I feel that good doctors should have these traits as well as patience, empathy and passion in their hearts. I think becoming a doctor is a job that requires a lot more than just these qualities, I believe that it isn’t just a job, but a lifestyle, and people who are thinking of becoming a doctor should be fully prepared to do the hours, and put in the work that is required to become a good doctor.

“I find it counterproductive that people cannot talk about dying, and the arrangements they need to make because surely you need to live well to die well.”

Blog 5: Blogger’s end

This is sadly my last blog, the last part of the project where I get to sum up my experiences. I feel that this project has taught me something about the way in which hospices work. I never expected in a million years for it to be so comforting and warm. It really is a misconception that people go to hospices to die, as they offer so many different services, from patients getting together and doing something fun one day a week, to living at the hospice full time. I feel that I have gained something to look into in the future, as we all get older and problems occur. However, I find it counterproductive that people cannot talk about dying, and the arrangements they need to make because surely you need to live well to die well. However, I feel that if all hospices were like St Joseph’s, they would make a good example to work towards preparations and this in turn, can prepare people.

From this project, I can look at the patients here, and say with confidence that having a terminal illness does not stop you from being you. It may make things difficult, but it doesn’t stop somebody doing what they want to do. For me, I find it wonderful that Kim gets in her wheelchair with her husband and her youngest child and goes to the shops on the weekend. This shows just how strong a woman she is, and I am thankful that I got the time to talk to her. She is a lovely woman, and I wish her the very best of luck in life.
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The National Council for Palliative Care (NCPC) is the umbrella charity for all those who are involved in providing, commissioning and using palliative care and end of life care services in England, Wales & Northern Ireland. NCPC promotes the extension and improvement of palliative care services for ALL people with life-threatening and life-limiting conditions in all settings.

Dying Matters is a coalition to raise public awareness and lessen the taboo around dying. The Coalition’s Mission is “to support changing knowledge, attitudes and behaviours towards death, dying and bereavement, and through this to make ‘living and dying well’ the norm. This will involve a fundamental change in society in which dying, death and bereavement will be seen and accepted as the natural part of everybody’s life cycle”.

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To find out more about Dying Matters, visit: www.dyingmatters.org