

Over the past ten years thousands of people from across the region have been helped by Durham County Carers Support, a charity which prides itself on being there for everyone during their darkest times. One carer reveals the impact the charity has had on his life as he strives to look after his wife

A helping hand for carers



AS A rare form of dementia took hold of David Whelan's wife, Judith, he began a journey he never wanted or asked to take.

"It was all new to me and I was finding it really difficult watching my beautiful wife of 30 years crumble away and her personality disintegrate," the 65-year-old from Pitlington recalls.

"So when a psychiatric community nurse suggested I get in touch with Durham County Carers Support to guide me, I was ready to grab any friendly voice I could get."

Judith's rare condition, Pick's Disease, began in 2013 and was originally diagnosed as stress and anxiety as she struggled to complete her sentences. Because she was so young, dementia wasn't really considered, so it was another two years before she was diagnosed with early onset dementia.

"You will never meet a more capable, positive and generous woman, and all of a sudden she would be mid-sentence and just lock," David recalls.

"It started to happen more and more and she was signed off work. Then, in 2015, she told me she didn't like being left at home and I took early retirement from Nissan, where I was an outbound logistics senior engineer, to look after her.

"Once upon a time she'd think nothing of tackling Scafell Pike in the Lake District. In fact, we completed around 200 of the Wainwright peaks. Now she struggles to walk very far at all, we have a wheelchair, and she is ready for bed by about 6pm.

"The disease progressed slowly at first, but now she can't really communicate.

"I'm convinced she is still in there and every now and again she will call me David and give some of the carers a hug and a big smile. I also played her some DVDs of Morecambe and Wise and she laughed, which was so uplifting, but it grieves me greatly to think she's trapped."

On such a lonely journey David is now accompanied by Durham County Carers Support.

"I was unsure even of the benefits we could claim," David says. "I always thought we had paid a lot of tax over the years and it would be nice to get some back in our hour of need. DCCS was so full of knowledge, empathy and sympathy, and they have guided me.

"They offered me talking therapy with counselling and I must admit I always came out feeling better than when I went in and quite a bit lighter as I had cried a lot."

David has been helped to secure day care – with staff coming in twice to help Judith into and out of bed – and continued healthcare with the NHS. He also attends monthly Zoom meetings with other carers to share any concerns.



"The NHS is full of abbreviations so it's great having someone on hand to help with that," says David. "I remember when my mum got cancer the pain I felt worrying about my dad. Now our daughters are going through a similar thing and it's a comfort to know that we're being given such good guidance on care.

"DCCS recommended an American occupational therapist, Teepa Snow. Her course was delivered locally to give me an insight into the effects of the condition and a positive approach to care. DCCS is also really good at recognising that Judith's needs are not the same as everyone with dementia."

David urges anyone who cares for family, friend or neighbours to get in touch with DCCS.

"Don't be shy, don't be afraid, do it sooner rather than later," he says. "They are so lovely, so caring. It's not just a job to them, they're in it for you and I'm sure would do it anyway... payment is just a bonus. You will only get a warm welcome."

Official estimates claim there are 13.6 million unpaid carers in country – an increase of 4.5 million since the beginning of the pandemic. Tens of thousands of these are in Darlington and County Durham.

Their tireless efforts save the taxpayer an estimated £132bn a year as they take on roles which would otherwise be the responsibility of the state.

Ten years ago five separate carer support charities came together to form Durham County Carers Support to improve efficiencies and ensure an equitable



Carer David Whelan with his wife Judith, above, who he now looks after with the help of Durham County Carers Support. Jenni Wood, the organisation's chief executive, left

service across the area.

DCCS – which has offices in Spennymoor and Darlington – offers a host of advice ranging from accessing benefits (including carers and attendance allowance), to occupational therapy, counselling and courses on IT, lifting and first aid, plus help for parent carers with children with educational special needs and disabilities.

"Ten years on our mission remains the same: to improve carers' lives and create a community where they are recognised, valued and supported," says Jenni Wood,

its chief executive.

"Since the pandemic we have never been so busy, but a decade of working in the sector has allowed us to become more resourceful and innovative than ever, develop an invaluable network of partners and recruit expert staff and volunteers to ensure we can sustain our services for the future."

For more information on Durham County Carers Support visit www.dccarers.org or call Durham on 0300 0051213 or Darlington on 0300 0301215.