

Speech for the 20th Anniversary Celebration of the Primrose Car Service Helen Nellis June 13th

Chair person Debbie Inskip, Volunteers and supporters of Primrose Cars. Good Afternoon everyone,

It is a great pleasure and a genuine privilege to be with you today in Peter and Heather's lovely garden as we celebrate a remarkable milestone- the twentieth anniversary of the Primrose Car Service.

As many of you know, I have been a supporter of this charity from its earliest days, and later, as HM Lord-Lieutenant, I had the honour of presenting the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service to the Primrose Car Service in 2014. That occasion recognised something very special: a service built on compassion, dedication, and community spirit. Looking around today, I can see the people who made that achievement possible and who continue to keep that spirit alive.

This is an opportunity not only to celebrate twenty years of success, but also to reflect on how this extraordinary service came into being, the lives it has touched, and the many people whose vision, generosity and commitment have made it possible.

Twenty years ago, shortly after the Primrose Unit opened at Bedford Hospital in 2003, patients were asked about their experiences of cancer treatment. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Patients spoke warmly of the excellent care they received through the partnership between the Primrose Unit and Addenbrooke's Cancer Centre in Cambridge.

But one challenge stood out above all others.

For Bedfordshire patients requiring radiotherapy treatment at Addenbrooke's, transport was often a major source of stress.

Many patients travelled by minibus, sharing journeys with several others. While that arrangement met a practical need, it meant long days away from home.

Patients frequently had to wait for others before returning home, turning what might have been a relatively short treatment appointment into an exhausting day-long experience.

And we should remember that radiotherapy is rarely a one-off treatment. Many patients require twenty or so visits. Imagine making that journey every weekday for weeks on end while coping with the emotional and physical effects of cancer treatment.

One of the most common side effects of radiotherapy is fatigue. Many patients simply could not drive themselves safely. Family members often struggled to take time away from work and other commitments. The burden on patients and their loved ones was immense.

Something needed to change.

Thankfully, there were people who looked at this problem and refused to accept it as inevitable.

The vision for a personalised transport service was championed by two remarkable individuals: Brian Woodrow, then Chairman of the Bedford Hospitals Charity, and Jean Beeden, a dedicated member of the Executive Committee.

Brian and Jean recognised that what patients needed was not simply transport. They needed dignity. They needed comfort. They needed flexibility. Most of all, they needed to know that someone cared.

Their idea was simple but transformative: instead of transporting groups of patients together, why not provide individual journeys, carrying just one or two patients at a time directly between home and Addenbrooke's?

It sounds obvious now, but at the time it was innovative, ambitious and required considerable determination to bring it to life.

Fortunately, they found willing partners in the East Anglian Ambulance Service.

I am so pleased that Luke Sqibb, Head of Operations Patient Transport Services is here today to celebrate the outstanding contribution of the Ambulance Service without which, we could not have prospered.

A strong and positive partnership quickly developed. The Charity brought the vision, determination and funding. The Ambulance Service brought expertise, operational knowledge and practical support.

Together they designed a service unlike any other.

And, as so often happens when people work for a truly worthwhile cause, the community responded magnificently.

The organisers began recruiting volunteer drivers.

They hoped for support.

What they received was overwhelming enthusiasm.

More than sixty people expressed an interest in filling just thirty volunteer positions.

That response says something profound about Bedfordshire.

It says that ours is a community where people care about one another.

It says that when a genuine need is identified, people step forward.

It says that kindness remains one of our greatest strengths.

At the same time, another important partnership was being forged.

An approach to Vauxhall Motors resulted in the donation of one vehicle free of charge, with three additional cars supplied at significantly discounted prices. The Charity funded the purchases, and after training, health checks and preparation, the service was ready to begin.

At the end of January 2006, the first Primrose Car Service journeys took place.

I doubt anyone present at that moment could have imagined just how successful the service would become.

From those first four cars and thirty volunteer drivers, the service has grown steadily and impressively.

Today, the fleet consists of six vehicles supported by thirty-seven volunteer drivers.

Each year approximately 3,750 patient journeys are undertaken.

Every year volunteers cover more than 150,000 miles.

When you add those figures together over two decades, the scale of what has been achieved is extraordinary.

But numbers only tell part of the story.

Behind every journey is a person.

A person who may be frightened.

A person facing uncertainty.

A person coping with treatment, fatigue and anxiety.

A person who simply needs someone to help them get where they need to be.

And that is where the Primrose Car Service has always excelled.

It has never been simply about driving.

It has been about caring.

Over the years, I have heard many stories from grateful patients.

One patient wrote:

"The treatment was difficult, but knowing my Primrose driver would arrive every morning took away one of my biggest worries."

Another said:

"The driver wasn't just my transport. He became my friend. We laughed together, talked about life, and sometimes sat quietly when that was what I needed."

One patient described the service as:

"A lifeline during the most difficult period of my life."

Another wrote:

"After treatment I was exhausted. The thought of driving myself home would have been impossible. The Primrose Service gave me comfort, safety and peace of mind."

Perhaps one of the most moving comments was simply:

"They treated me as a person, not a patient."

What a wonderful tribute.

Not to the cars.

Not to the organisation.

But to the volunteers.

Because it is the volunteers who create those experiences every single day.

Today, therefore, we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to every volunteer driver, past and present.

You have given your time freely.

You have adjusted your schedules.

You have driven through rain, snow, traffic jams and roadworks.

You have started early and returned late.

You have listened to stories, offered encouragement and shared moments of joy and sadness.

Many patients have spoken of how much those conversations meant.

Sometimes a volunteer driver may not realise the impact they have had.

But I assure you, the patients remember.

They remember your kindness.

They remember your patience.

They remember your reassurance.

And they remember that someone cared enough to help.

I would like to pay special tribute to those drivers who joined the service in 2006 and are still volunteering today. Stephanie Wilson and Keith Rawlings.

Twenty years of service.

Twenty years of commitment.

Twenty years of helping others.

That is an extraordinary achievement and one worthy of our deepest admiration.

I know that Keith is here today, and I hope they both realise how grateful we all are.

And no, as we have been assured, neither has yet reached their ninetieth birthday!

We should also recognise the people who work tirelessly behind the scenes.

Services such as this do not run themselves.

Schedules must be organised.

Vehicles maintained.

Drivers recruited.

Training arranged for volunteers.

Records kept.

Patients supported.

And here I would like to pay special tribute to Delphi Ellis.

Over the years her role has evolved with the service. For many years she was Volunteer Coordinator and managed driver availability and recruitment. It would be fair to say that she made an outstanding contribution to the success of the service and kept us all on the straight and narrow as far as rules and regulations were required for volunteers. The Welfare of our volunteers is of paramount importance to Delphi and she continues to make sure they are well looked after.

The East Anglian Ambulance Service has played a vital role throughout the life of the service, ensuring that vehicles are insured, maintained and operated safely.

Their ongoing partnership has been essential to the success of the Primrose Car Service and deserves our heartfelt thanks.

We should also acknowledge the generosity of the wider community.

The vehicles themselves are purchased through charitable donations and community support.

Over the years many organisations, businesses and individuals have contributed. There are far too many to mention.

Among recent examples are the remarkable £75,000 donated by Panacea and the outstanding £16,000 raised by Pavenham Golf Club through the efforts of one of our volunteer drivers and the club captains.

Mike Walsh, one of our drivers, who has undertaken three gruelling cycling rides raising substantial sums for the service. Another is Francis Malley who has donated the royalties from his books to Primrose Cars. The first book was based on the Car Service to Addenbrookes.

Those donations, along with countless others large and small, have ensured that this service remains free to every eligible patient.

That generosity reflects the very best of Bedfordshire.

Of course, no reflection on the past twenty years would be complete without mentioning the Covid pandemic.

Those were challenging times for everyone, but particularly for people undergoing cancer treatment.

The service had to adapt rapidly.

To protect patients, journeys were reduced to one patient per vehicle.

Additional cars were introduced, increasing the fleet from four to six.

And despite all the uncertainty and risks, the volunteer drivers continued.

They carried on serving patients when they were needed most.

Many patients have since expressed how much that continuity of support meant to them during such difficult circumstances.

It was another example of the dedication that defines this service.

In 2014, that dedication received national recognition when the Primrose Car Service was awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service—the highest honour given to volunteer groups in the United Kingdom.

I remember with great pride presenting that award at Lord-Lieutenant.

The honour recognised not merely what the service did, but how it did it.

With compassion.

With humility.

With professionalism.

And with an unwavering commitment to patients.

As far as we know, this remains a unique service.

That fact alone should make everyone associated with it immensely proud.

Today we are delighted to welcome many of those who helped shape the service from the beginning.

We remember with gratitude the vision of Brian Woodrow and Jean Beeden.

We welcome Gordon Beeden and many others who played important roles during those formative years.

We acknowledge Dick Wilkinson, Brian Hanling and all those whose contributions helped transform an idea into a reality.

We thank our colleagues from the Primrose Unit and the Ambulance Service.

And we celebrate every volunteer, donor, supporter and friend who has been part of this journey.

There are two people whom I would particularly like to recognise this evening, and that is Ken Williams and Peter Marks.

Having watched the development of the Primrose Car Service over many years, I know just how much they have contributed to its success. It is often said that starting a worthwhile project requires vision, but sustaining it over decades requires dedication, resilience and hard work. Ken and Peter have provided exactly that.

They have guided the service through many challenges and changing circumstances, always with the same unwavering commitment to the patients who depend upon it. They have overseen the growth of the service, helped secure its future, supported generations of volunteer drivers and ensured that the highest standards have been maintained. When difficulties arose, as they inevitably do in any long-running charitable venture, they approached them with calm determination and a practical willingness to find solutions.

I know from personal experience that much of what Ken and Peter have done has taken place quietly, behind the scenes and without seeking recognition. Yet the continued success of the Primrose Car Service owes an enormous amount to their stewardship. During the particularly difficult years of the Covid pandemic, their leadership helped ensure that this vital service continued to operate for patients who needed it more than ever.

As someone who has been privileged to support this charity from its earliest days, I have seen first-hand the difference that strong

leadership can make. The fact that we are gathered here tonight celebrating twenty years of this unique and much-loved service is due in no small measure to the commitment, judgement and perseverance of Ken Williams and Peter Marks.

On behalf of everyone here, and the many thousands of patients and families who have benefited from the Primrose Car Service, I offer them our sincere thanks and deepest appreciation.

As we look to the future, we should remember that the need for this service has not diminished.

Cancer treatment continues.

Patients still need support.

Families still need reassurance.

And every day, the Primrose Car Service continues to make an enormous difference.

The founders created something far greater than a transport scheme.

They created a community of care.

A community that has carried thousands of people through some of the most challenging periods of their lives.

That legacy deserves to endure for many years to come.

So today, on this twentieth anniversary, let us celebrate what has been achieved.

Let us honour those who had the vision to start the service.

Let us thank those who manage and support it.

Let us recognise the generosity of our donors.

And above all, let us salute the volunteer drivers- past, present and future whose kindness has transformed countless journeys into acts of compassion.

To everyone associated with the Primrose Car Service:

Thank you for twenty years of service.

Thank you for twenty years of dedication.

Thank you for twenty years of care.

And may the next twenty years be every bit as successful and inspiring as the first.

Congratulations, and happy anniversary.

Thank you.