

Belong Life

WINTER 2024



The Champion Awards 2024 – see pages 8 & 9

Belong Macclesfield remembers special resident at garden opening - pages 2 & 3



Belong Crewe comes out in force for Ivy's 105th
Page 5



Belong Morris Feinmann residents enjoy VIP visit to Etihad
Page 7



Sankofa Songsters Enjoy TV Debut with Lorraine interview
Page 11

Plus...

- A customer's view
- Memory lane
- Living the values
- In the spotlight
- Volunteer profile
- Village news and more!



BELONG
VILLAGES



Word from the team

Chief Executive Martin Rix introduces the first issue of 2025 considering the importance of our colleagues.

We start a new year by celebrating the achievements of our colleagues and volunteers over the last 12 months. In January, our annual Champion Awards proved to be a record breaker with over 550 nominations whittled down to 36 finalists and 12 award winners – thank you to everyone who took the time to contribute to the process.

It will always be the compassion of people that is critical to our sector's success. We are therefore pleased that so many of our talented colleagues choose to build their careers with Belong, opting to dedicate their professional lives to caring for our customers, or, as many of the award entries describe, treating everyone 'as family'.

Though it was a difficult task selecting the best of the best for our awards, we have delighted in reading every single nomination and hearing of such lifting stories and positive feedback. We really are proud to have so many champions in our midst.

Equally, our goal as an employer is to offer the best and we believe our village set-up creates a special working environment, coupled with extensive training and career development opportunities. As such, we're always keen to speak to those who share our values, so please encourage anyone who might be a good fit to get in touch.

Don't forget, there is also opportunity to recognise good work across the villages and Belong at Home teams with the monthly A.C.E. (Achieving, Caring, Extra Mile) Awards.

In other great news, congratulations go to the Sankofa Songsters for their TV debut. The intergenerational choir based at Belong Chester was personally invited by Catherine, Princess of Wales, to take part in ITV's Royal Carols: Together at Christmas, leading a rendition of 'Away in a Manger' at Westminster Abbey. Performing together in front of millions of viewers was a wonderful moment, indeed.

A special shout-out also to Bridget Lawler, one of our Admiral Nurses, who is celebrating 50 years in nursing, this year – a tremendous achievement!

As always, amongst these pages you'll find more happy stories, including big birthdays, new gardens and the rubbing of shoulders with football legends. Keep up to date with more goings on via our Instagram, Facebook and X social media channels, and do tag us in your own posts so we can do the same.

To all our readers, have a wonderful year ahead.

Martin Rix

Belong Chief Executive



Belong Macclesfield remembers special resident at garden opening

Pictured: (left to right) Belong Macclesfield General Manager Cheryl Davies with friends of Beryl, Ron Oldham and Anthea and Ken Lee.

A former resident has been remembered at the official opening of a garden that she helped fund at Belong Macclesfield, where she loved to spend time outdoors.

The garden recently received a complete makeover, funded in part by Beryl Casswell, who lived at the village before she died.

As part of her legacy, the garden has enjoyed landscaping and the additions of raised vegetable troughs and planters for flowers and plants, as well as new furniture, lighting, tool shed and a summer house.

Another former resident, Diana Seabright, also made a donation towards the creation of a wildflower area at the care village.

Residents and colleagues, members of the local community and Beryl's friends gathered in the garden to celebrate the unveiling, with entertainment from Anna Beaumont, known as the Golden Age Songbird, who sang classic songs from the 20s to the 50s. They also unveiled a deer sculpture with a plaque as a tribute to Beryl.

Many of Belong Macclesfield's residents already enjoy gardening, which has been shown to have a number of benefits for older people, including those living with dementia, such as maintaining strength and balance, as well as providing sensory stimulation that improves mood and cognitive function. The raised flowerbeds and planters will enable those who struggle to bend down, including wheelchair users, to take part.

Pictured above: The newly created garden at Belong Macclesfield

Consultations took place to determine what residents and colleagues at Belong Macclesfield wanted the garden to feature and how they wanted it to look, with the contract to execute the final design being awarded to Landscape Engineering Ltd.

Commenting on the official opening, General Manager Cheryl Davies said: "The garden is a fitting tribute to a beautiful person, who was loved by all at Belong, and it will be enjoyed by countless people years to come. Thank you to the generous lady for this and everyone who came along to commemorate her."

"We would also like to give special thanks to Urban Green and Landscape Engineering Ltd. for designing and creating the garden."

“The garden is a fitting tribute to a beautiful person, who was loved by all at Belong, and it will be enjoyed by countless people years to come.”



Pictured: Anna Beaumont, known as the Golden Age Songbird, performs at the official opening



Pictured: (left to right) Friends of Beryl, Ken and Anthea Lee and Ron Oldham with the deer sculpture

A Customer's View: Jim Brooks

Nothing is more important to Belong than our customers, which is why we love hearing about their experiences.

For this issue, we spoke to **Jim Brooks**, who shares his journey as the son of the dearly loved, late Pat Brooks who lived at **Belong Warrington** for almost two and half years, taking advantage of a number of Belong services. We were deeply touched that Jim took the time to share with us his family's story.

Mum always had an uncanny knack of pre-empting us at every turn. Just as we were nervously tiptoeing around how to broach the topic of, "Maybe it's time to think about supported living," Mum suddenly beat us to it and announced—brace yourselves—she was moving to an apartment at Belong Warrington.

Belong wasn't a new place to mum. She'd already been frequenting The Bistro there, using it as a prime spot to catch up with friends over lattes, tea and cake like she was in her own personal episode of Downton Abbey. She settled in like she'd lived there forever. Village life suited her, and the move brought much needed relief to my wife Jane and I. No more sleepless nights wondering if she was safe alone in her bungalow. It felt like our family had grown exponentially.

Then, when she started needing a little more help in her apartment, we called in Belong's home care services. Belong's 24-hour emergency response? Oh, she tested that alright! But the village team rose to the occasion every single time. They didn't just ensure she was physically okay; they also knew how to calm her nerves and make her feel safe by giving her the emotional support and reassurance she needed. It's like they had a sixth sense for what she needed—emotional first aid, if you will.

But honestly, calling it just a "care service" feels like calling a Michelin-starred restaurant "a place that sells food." The team didn't just care for Mum—they cared *about* her. Her carers were more like her new best friends, and possibly a few could've passed as adopted family.

Changing needs

Mum spent two blissful years in her own apartment, but then we noticed things starting to change with her physical health and she didn't want to live alone any longer; she started to retreat from the social butterfly life she had

If you would like to contribute to the next 'A Customer's View' column, please pass on your details to a member of staff or email the editor at: tracy.brookes@belong.org.uk



Pictured: Jim and his Mother, Pat Brooks

been leading. It became clear it was time to move on from her own apartment. Mum was no stranger to the Threlfall Household—she'd pop in there often, socialising with residents and staff like it was her second home. So when the time came for 24-hour care, this made for a remarkably easy transition, because why miss out on round-the-clock company and the occasional emergency cuppa?

A life well lived

Again, Belong outdid themselves. The support? Impeccable. The care? Unbeatable. The fun? Oh, there was plenty of that too! Mum, with her razor-sharp Scouse wit and wicked sense of humour, found endless joy in bantering and teasing the team. It was like she had her own personal 'captive' audience, and they adored her for it. Even in her final days, she remained the charismatic, fierce force of nature we all knew and loved.

What's more, they treated her with the respect she deserved, especially as her health declined. When she had hospital stays, the staff didn't clock out emotionally. They visited her on their days off, bringing not just comfort but a kind of warmth, care and attention you don't find in just any care home but only in a care home that truly cares.

The difference Belong made to Mum, Jane and I and the rest of the family is something we'll always hold close. They ensured her last days were as good as they could be, and for that, we're forever grateful.

Crewe Comes Out in Force for Ivy's 105th

Celebrating another year is always a joyous occasion but perhaps few birthdays are as special as sharing one with your hometown, as Crewe's Ivy Hart marked her 105th surrounded by a haul of well wishes from the community.

Ivy enjoyed her big party with her family, friends and a heartening 270 cards after carers at her home, Belong Crewe, put a callout to locals in a bid to make the centenarian's milestone day her best one yet. After the request spread via social media and word of mouth, the team surprised their resident with the remarkable outcome of the appeal.

Speaking of the moment, Ivy said: "For me, my age is just a number, and the number just keeps getting bigger. I've lived a very long life, and I believe it's all about being happy and enjoying what you do and what you've got."

More contributions came from young friends at nearby Pebble Brook Primary School, with pupils providing their rendition of Happy Birthday. Live entertainment followed, as did the presentation of gifts and a special cake whipped up by the village's in-house bistro team. Also joining the fun, Crewe Town Mayor, Cllr Dawn Clark dropped by to share her favourite Ivy stories, having known her for a number of years.

Born into a world coming to the terms with the impact of WWI, Ivy has seen no fewer than five monarchs and 23 prime ministers, and perhaps most befitting of her character, just days after her birth came a new act of parliament enabling women to join professional bodies, sit on juries and be awarded degrees.



Pictured: Belong Crewe's Ivy celebrates her 105th with her friend and Crewe Town Mayor, Cllr Dawn Clark.

Fiercely independent, it was following the sad and sudden death of her husband George when Ivy moved to Abergele, north Wales, dedicating her time to her dogs and singing in local choirs. She later returned to Crewe to train as a teacher, supporting boys with learning difficulties. She resided in her home until earlier this year, when she chose to move to Belong Crewe.

Ivy joins a very small club of approximately 600 people of the same age or older in England & Wales, the last surviving of those born before the 1920s.

Organiser of the event, Belong Crewe Experience Coordinator, Jessica Butler, commented: "Our beautiful Ivy is very dear to us, and we wanted everyone to share in her day and give her a nice surprise.

"Her sight and hearing aren't what they used to be and so she was delighted to receive so many with bold colours and some even featuring music. We've had a fantastic response and we're very grateful for everyone who's made Ivy's day special for her."

A Birthday Celebration Fit for a Queenie!

Belong Crewe's very own Muriel 'Queenie' Carter has officially joined the centenarian club, and we couldn't let such a milestone pass without a grand celebration!

The team pulled out all the stops to throw a heartwarming birthday party, bringing together family and friends—both near and far! The surprise gathering was filled with love, laughter, live music, delicious food, and plenty of bubbles. To top it all off, Muriel received a very special birthday card from fellow royalty—the King and Queen.

Despite the distance, Muriel was able to connect with her grandchildren across multiple time zones, thanks to a Zoom call that brought everyone together for this unforgettable occasion.



Pictured: Muriel 'Queenie' Carter enjoyed her grand celebration.

Memory Lane...

This spring marks 80 years since the end of the Second World War, with Victory in Europe (VE) Day on May 8. Here, we share the story of WWII veteran Margaret Paling, Brampton House resident at Belong Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Margaret Paling (née Hindle) was born in Gateshead, before being raised in Bircotes, near Doncaster. The youngest of eight, much of her upbringing was supported by her siblings, the eldest being 19 years her senior.

Her father had left the army and was out of work in the North East, and so the family relocated for him to work at Harworth Colliery, with Margaret joining in 1939 for clerical work, replacing men called up for the war.



Age 16 (1941)

Army ambitions

With her father, grandfather and brothers all serving for the country, in 1942, a 17-year-old Margaret became one of the first to join the Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME), a newly founded maintenance arm of the British Army responsible for equipment.

She had signed up alongside a friend with her heart set on being a driver, but due to a shortage of secretaries, Margaret was allocated clerical duties. Her companion had failed to get parental consent, and it would be another year before she was seen again. This time, now of adult age, parental approval was no longer required and, ironically, Margaret spotted her driving a lorry – she was furious!



Margaret at work

Margaret was posted all over the country, including stints in Yorkshire and Leicestershire. In 1945, she was posted to the Headquarters of the Central Mediterranean Force, stationed in Caserta, Southern Italy, until the end of her service.

She recalls her army years fondly, describing feeling 'part of the family, not regarded as being any different'. She also remembers that 'life was enjoyable, rarely unhappy' and how proud she is of REME and their work.



Margaret with son, Alan, and support workers Kelly and Kerry.

After the war

After leaving in 1946, Margaret's career continued with clerical duties. Two years later, she married joiner Cyril Paling and the happy couple lived in Winchester to be close to Margaret's father, who would later require support as he grew older. In 1952, they welcomed their son, Alan, to complete their family.

Life proved challenging. The de-rationing of food and other goods was a slow process, and it would be another 18 months before it was complete. Meanwhile, Margaret had to juggle a newborn son, working as a secretary for the Royal British Legion by day and cleaning the building by night.

In the subsequent years, she continued her secretarial work at schools and colleges, as well as working at Child Guidance.

Later life

Margaret has remained an active member of the REME branch, attending meetings, functions, and proudly parading with her colleagues on Armed Forces Day. Of the identified living cohort of 18 original REME members, she is the last surviving woman.

She has also enjoyed welcoming two grandchildren into the world, Tim and Sarah, as well as great granddaughter, Betsy. By this summer, the family is set to grow with the addition of two more great grandchildren.

As part of Margaret's 100th birthday celebrations in January, village housekeeper Stephanie Foster reached out to 32 Royal Engineer Regiment and in response received a video of best wishes for the day (it can be viewed on Belong's Instagram @belongvillages). The village threw a special party, with the family joined by REME representatives.

We asked the birthday girl what she made of turning 100 and Margaret said: "I've had a happy life. A big family. Lots of friends. Thank you!"

We are sorry to say that Margaret sadly passed away a few weeks after her birthday. The thoughts of everyone at Belong are with her son, Alan, and all the family at this difficult time.



Belong Morris Feinmann residents enjoy VIP visit to Etihad

Pictured: Blue fans from Belong Morris Feinmann mingle with former Man City stars

A group of some of Manchester City's longest-serving supporters have been rubbing shoulders with legends of the club, catching up about all things Blue, thanks to a dementia-friendly session designed to bring older fans together to share their love of their team.

The group of Cityzens travelled from their Didsbury home, Belong Morris Feinmann for an afternoon at the Etihad Stadium talking shop with their heroes, former players Brian Kidd (1976-79), Alex Williams (1980-86), and David White (1985-93). The guests took in the impressive view of the stadium from the event hosted from the Mancunian Suite overlooking Colin Bell Stand before enjoying a special meal with kosher option, live entertainment and dancing.

Amongst those attending was the club's former doctor (1976-2008) Norman Luft, who relished the opportunity to meet old colleagues and friends. He said: "It was a wonderful trip, and the best part was meeting with Brian, David and Alex – it brought all the memories of my career back, and they looked after us all so well, it was tremendous!"

The visit was arranged by Belong's experience team as part of its vibrant programme of activities for its customers, designed in line with their hobbies and interest with the goal of promoting wellbeing. The group joined others at the club's ReminisCITY initiative, offering a dementia-safe environment for fans to enjoy a club experience and the chance to meet fellow MCFC supporters.

Last year, Belong Morris Feinmann welcomed the club's silverware from its continental treble-winning 2022-23



Pictured: MCFC's former club doctor, Norman Luft (left) with Brian Kidd

season, with its customers and families treated to a private viewing of the UEFA Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup trophies.

Angela Lockett, Cultural Experience Coordinator at Belong Morris Feinmann, commented: "After previously welcoming the trophies, we thought we'd go one better this year and indulge our customers' passion with a visit to the Etihad Stadium. The team means so much to them, so their dream really has come true. Of course, we'll be looking to go Red for our next day trip to make sure.



Belong Hails Inspirational care champions

Pictured above: Belong colleagues celebrate their success at the annual Champion Awards

Dedicated colleagues from across Belong enjoyed a special night out as we rolled out the red carpet at Belong's annual Champion Awards. The event recognises the best of the best across our villages and community care teams.

Twelve accolades were handed out at the dazzling ceremony to our teams and volunteers from across the North West and West Midlands for exceptional performances supporting older people to live active and fulfilling lives.

After receiving nominations from the customers, relatives and colleagues, a panel of independent judges determined winners from a final shortlist, with the results revealed at an evening gala at The Queen at Chester Hotel. All were presented with a handmade ceramic trophy, designed by Belong Newcastle-under-Lyme resident, Alma Worthington, as part of a creative competition for the occasion.

Speaking of the event, Belong's chief executive, Martin Rix, said: "We have many talented colleagues who have chosen to dedicate their professional lives to caring for our customers, with many nominations describing them as being 'like family'.

"As discussion around the reform of social care continues to gain traction, we are committed to shining a light on both their professionalism and hard work through these awards. We know, first-hand, that it is our ability to attract an invest in our people that is critical to the future of the sector. Our unique 'village living' set-up creates a truly special working environment where people can thrive, and our annual Champion Awards serve to congratulate all our colleagues for their success."

The Belong Champion Awards 2024 was made possible thanks to sponsors: Arjo, Citron Hygiene, Litmus, M&D Cleaning, Search, Triangle PR, AES, Almanhall, Barons Furniture, Boxxe Tech Solutions, Gaskells Waste, Howden Insurance, Jantex Furnishing Company, KHS Group, PCS, Rowtype and West Derby Carpets.



The Belong Champion Awards 2024 winners:

- 1 Newcomer of the Year Award:** Jessica Murphy, Support Worker, Belong Crewe
- 2 Made-My-Day Award:** David Bithell, Caretaker, Belong Crewe
- 3 End-of-Life Care Award:** Coronation Household Team, Belong Crewe
- 4 Innovation Award:** Emma Palin, Experience & Heritage Coordinator, Belong Newcastle-under-Lyme
- 5 Mentor of the Year:** Jessica Ainsworth, Household Team Leader, Belong Macclesfield
- 6 Belinda Jones Dementia Champion of the Year:** Emma Gorton collected the award on behalf of Nicola Hart, Community Support Worker, Belong at Home Macclesfield
- 7 Compassion Award:** Laura Cooper, Community Support Worker, Belong at Home Warrington
- 8 Community Engagement Award:** Belong Wigan Experience Day Team
- 9 Volunteer Award:** Matthew Boardman, Volunteer, Belong Wigan
- 10 Team of the Year Award:** Cedar Household, Belong Wigan
- 11 Central Services Contribution Award:** IT Team
- 12 Leader of the Year:** Jemma Sharratt, Support Manager, Belong Atherton





Sankofa Songsters Enjoy TV Debut with Royal Family

Pictured: Members of the Sankofa Songsters (L-R) Amanda Wrigley (choirmaster, Live the Beat); Ian Kearl (Belong Chester resident); Charlotte Worthington and Serah Savio (The Nursery in Belong).

Belong Chester's intergenerational choir was catapulted into the national limelight after its caring community spirit resulted in an invitation to Westminster Abbey to perform, by royal request, at ITV's Royal Carols: Together at Christmas concert.

The Sankofa Songsters, aged from two to 100, comprises residents of the Belong Chester care village, children of the Nursery in Belong, operated by the charity, Ready Generations, and members of the wider community, including pupils from Hoole CE Primary School.

30 of the choir's members made the 400-mile round trip to Westminster Abbey after choirmaster Amanda Wrigley received a letter from Her Royal Highness Catherine the Princess of Wales to lead the concert's 1,600-strong congregation in a rendition of Away in a Manger.

Millions of viewers in the UK and around the world were able to tune into what is now an annual festive staple in the Royal calendar, when the concert was aired on ITV1 at 7:30pm on Christmas Eve.

Ian Kearl, aged 91, was one of the Belong tenants who sang at the concert, having joined the choir after losing his wife earlier this year. The former RAF pilot said: "This opportunity brought together both my love of singing and love of my community. It was a very special day and being there with friends who have provided much support and camaraderie over the past year made it even more poignant."

Ruth Sandbach, Manager of the Nursery in Belong, said: "Our children couldn't have been more excited at this opportunity to travel to London and sing in front of the Princess of Wales and her family. It's a day which I'm sure will live in their

memories for many years to come and we hope that the visit will be reciprocated in the future!"

With this year's service featuring personal stories of those who show love, empathy and kindness in their communities, the Sankofa Songsters were invited for their compassionate support of local people. The group meets weekly at the care village to rehearse their performances which welcome people of all ages and abilities to join, with a particular focus on bringing older people and young children together. Recent highlights include a Christmas carols service at Chester's All Saints Church, a community sing-along at The Hammond School, and Elders Week at Storyhouse arts centre.

Choirmaster, Amanda Wrigley, added: "Singing brings people of all ages together in an incredibly uplifting and joyous way and provides an escape day-to-day living challenges they may be facing. It has been an incredible journey to grow our choir over the past year, but we could never have imagined that it would lead to an opportunity as momentous as this."

The name, Sankofa Songsters, takes inspiration from the principles of Sankofa leadership, a Ghanaian concept acknowledging the need to reflect on the past in order to build a successful future.

Caroline Ray, General Manager of Belong Chester, explained: "The aim of integrating a children's nursery within our care village was very much about bringing young and old together under one roof. Children benefit from opportunities to learn from their older friends, who in turn value the sense of purpose and sheer fun that comes with spending time together."

As well as choir singing, shared experiences include arts and crafts, mealtimes and excursions.

Belong Newcastle Welcomes New Critter Companions

As Chinese New Year welcomes the Year of the Snake, slithering serpents have been getting to know Newcastle-under-Lyme's older community, with residents and tenants at Belong Newcastle-under-Lyme playing host for a special meet-and-greet to mark the celebration.

Also joining, chinchillas, tortoises and even dragon lizards spent an afternoon in the care of the Lower Street community, with Belong customers petting the exotic creatures, finding out all about them, and in some cases, daring to 'wear' them wrapped around their persons.

Apartment tenant, Mary Burndrett, 84, said: "I have always been an avid watcher of David Attenborough-type programmes. Because of the visit I have been able to touch the animals – I expected them to feel warm, but they weren't!"

The session was arranged by the village's experience team as part of its vibrant programme of activities for its customers and wider community, with Staffordshire-based Critterish Allsorts called upon to facilitate the animal assisted therapy.

Participants benefitted from the chance to try something new, forge fresh friendships, and enjoy a sense of camaraderie by encouraging one another to touch, hold and wear the lesser-known creatures.



Pictured: Belong Newcastle-under-Lyme apartment tenant, Mary Burndrett, meets Bullie, an albino bull snake.

In addition, it proved to support the wellbeing of those living with dementia, as Emma Palin, Experience and Heritage Coordinator at Belong Newcastle-under-Lyme, explains: "Animal therapy provides the opportunity to socialise without the need to engage in conversation, so our customers with little or no verbal communication could join in, too. It gave them a sense of companionship whilst offering mental stimulation – they really got a lot out of it."

"What a wonderful afternoon our customers have had! The session was a hit, and everyone left with big smiles and happy hearts. We look forward to welcoming our new animal friends back soon."



Pictured: Matthew and Joan Larkin celebrate Halloween 2024 at Platt Bridge Community Centre

In this feature, we recognise the outstanding contributions of volunteers to the Belong community.

This issue we meet 16-year-old Matthew Broadman, who helps the experience day team at Belong Wigan, where he is a hit with customers, and won the Volunteer Award at the Champion Awards.

While studying for his GCSEs, Matthew was looking to gain skills and experience that would be necessary in his future career as a surgeon, as well as an opportunity to give back to the local community. This meant the opportunity to practise developing rapport with people, in particular those living with health conditions.

While researching volunteering opportunities at local care providers, he learned about Belong.

Volunteer Profile: Matthew Boardman

"I was drawn to the quality of care, the well-kept facilities and its values," says Matthew.

Working with the experience day team three days a week during the summer, he helped to organise activities, excursions and other entertainment for customers, including playing games, gardening and trips to the local community centre, supporting people to participate however they like.

He often takes on the role of bingo caller and is known for making drinks for everyone, remembering how each person likes theirs without fail, during activities.

"He was ready to go from day one," says Experience Coordinator Charlene. "He spends all his spare time at the village and really makes a difference, showing amazing dedication and a caring nature. His cheerful attitude brings so much joy to our community; his presence lights up the room, and he sets a great example for other young volunteers. He has a wonderful way of connecting with customers, who adore him and look forward to seeing him."

"A highlight was when he dressed up for Halloween, making the day special and fun for everyone and showing how much he cares about bringing smiles to people's faces."

Matthew has now begun studying for A-Levels, in biology, chemistry and mathematics, and will continue to volunteer at Belong Wigan during the holidays.

In The Spotlight: Bridget Lawler

This year marks the golden work anniversary for Belong Admiral Nurse, Bridget Lawler – we caught up with her to hear more about reaching an incredible 50 years in nursing.

“Nursing can take you to places you could never think of,”



Pictured: A young Bridget in her first year of nursing

Bridget recalls her first day, standing in front of the matron. “She explained how the profession was so much more than wiping brows and carrying bedpans, that in fact, it could ‘take you to places you could never think of.’”

Fresh from school in South Africa, young Bridget was studying nursing and midwifery at Sharley Cribb Nursing College (now Lilitha Nursing College) in Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth).

Having qualified, she built her experience in

the following years working in hospitals and for her community, including managing a youth health centre providing family planning support.

By 1991, she was imparting her expertise, teaching student nurses in tandem with completing a degree. By 1997, Bridget was proudly able to call herself a graduate of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, having achieved a degree in Nursing Education and Administration, and Primary Healthcare.

Next generation

For her next steps, Bridget continued working as a Nurse Educator in private healthcare before returning to Sharley Cribb Nursing College, this time serving as a lecturer to a new generation of nurses.

She remembers this time fondly, where she enjoyed teaching community health – both theory and practical, training students in homes and community clinics. Bridget says: “I really loved this aspect of the job. Students would get together and cook soup and once a week we’d serve the community. It was more than just learning how to be a nurse; it was about caring for people.”

Belong life

In 2013, Bridget joined Belong. Having spent four years building a life in the UK as Registered Manager of a nursing home in Greater



Pictured: Fully qualified: graduation day



Pictured: Bridget's golden celebration

Manchester, she took up post as Belong Atherton's Practice Development Facilitator (PDF), leading colleagues' professional development and training.

“A friend of a friend was a support worker at Belong Wigan,” Bridget remembers. “She mentioned the PDF role and so I went online the same day to find out more – there was only one day left before applications closed, meaning it was a bit of a rush to get mine in. Of course, it all worked out well, in the end!”

In 2021, she became one of Belong's two Admiral Nurses. The specialist dementia nurse position in conjunction with charity, Dementia UK, collaborates with other professionals to tailor support for Belong customers and their families. From 2023, the service widened its support for local communities, offering appointments at Belong villages' memory cafes, known as 'B's Cafe'.

Golden jubilee

Earlier this year, Belong Atherton hosted a party to celebrate Bridget's career milestone, as she explains: “I had made a passing comment to Christine Thomas (the village's Bistro and Catering Manager), joking that it had been a long day and as I was coming up to 50 years perhaps it was time I retired.”

Always one to throw a party, Christine set the wheels into motion, planning a surprise for her colleague.

Bridget continues: “I hadn't the slightest clue and I'm usually good at sussing things out. What a surprise it was to see so many people there for me; it was very special. That's what I love about Belong, everyone is caring, like a family.”

“Thank you to Christine and to so many other people throughout my career. There are too many to name, but you know who you are – thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“It's true what the matron said: when you're a nurse, the world really is your oyster and the last 12 years at Belong, I have found the pearl in the oyster. I wouldn't change the last 50 years for any other career.”

A massive congratulations on your golden year, Bridget, from all your Belong family!



We speak to colleagues who embody Belong's values in their day-to-day work.

For this issue, we have a chat with Matt Anderson, newbie Bistro Assistant at Belong Macclesfield, who shares his experience of his first six months working at the village.

Have you always worked in care?

My background is in hospitality, but I've always worked with the public. I lived in Cyprus for 15 years, working in bars and restaurants. More recently, I was at a children's charity, here in the UK. I like being around people and really getting to know them, so the village is the perfect place for me to be!

I live locally and I've always liked that the village is open to the public and doesn't feel like a 'traditional care home'. We have people living in the area who sit with our customers in The Bistro, and they get chatting and become friends. It's lovely that everyone can meet new people.

What do you enjoy most about your role?

It's a very important job, ensuring everyone is fed and watered! We prep food for the households; the kitchen will prepare main meals, and we'll support with everything else, such as side dishes, and either take it up to the residents, or they can dine in the bistro, if preferred. I like the team camaraderie – my household colleagues really know their residents, so they advise how best to cater for them and their preferences. Without this support, I wouldn't be able to do my job.

I also enjoy the parties we host here in The Bistro. Norma was celebrating her 90th birthday and her family hired it out for a high tea afternoon, inviting all her friends. It was a fabulous afternoon.



Pictured: Matt Anderson

We hear you're really involved in village life. Tell us more?

There's opportunity to contribute ideas, both here in The Bistro and the wider village. For example, I led a gingerbread house decorating competition over Christmas, with all households submitting an entry and everyone voted. I was also able to swing some vouchers for our Christmas market raffle from a friend at travel agent, Magna Travel.

I'm proud of the work we do, here at Belong. I really look forward to coming to work, getting to know our customers and when I see them enjoying one of my ideas, something I've created, I feel a strong sense of achievement.

I can't thank everyone here enough for helping me settle in. Everyone from the management to our customers is supportive and without the team around me, I wouldn't be able to love my job as much as I do. They really spur me on to be the best I can be.

And finally, what do you get up to in your spare time?

Baking! I've been testing a few fudge recipes recently and I bring batches into the village – they don't last long. I appreciate the feedback (everyone is brutally honest)! You'll usually find me in my kitchen whilst listening to Dolly Parton, Cher, Tina Turner – I love the divas!

Noticeboard

For further details on these stories and more, from across our villages, follow us on Facebook, Instagram or X, or visit our news page on our website at: www.belong.org.uk/news

A Flavourful Chinese New Year Celebration!

Customers gathered for a delightful evening at The Bistro to celebrate Chinese New Year in style!

The atmosphere was alive with the sounds of authentic Chinese music, setting the perfect backdrop for a delicious feast prepared by our talented bistro team. On the menu were classic favourites, including sweet and sour chicken and beef in black bean sauce, served with rice, prawn crackers, and crispy vegetable samosas—a true treat for the taste buds! It was a fantastic evening filled with great food, music, and wonderful company!



Pictured: Belong Atherton residents enjoying the celebrations.



Pictured: Laurie Walsh card winner



Pictured: Belong Macclesfield Xmas card winners

Laurie's Artistic Talents Spread Christmas Joy

Festive cheer was well and truly ringing in Chester and Macclesfield thanks to the well wishes of the residents winning a Christmas card competition.

Laurie Walsh's artistic talents made their way into letterboxes in the form of a Christmas card spreading neighbourly joy after the 82-year-old won a competition at her home, Belong Chester. Featuring a hand-painted robin redbreast, the design featured a traditional symbol associated with Yuletide good wishes and was inspired by the artist's love for painting birds using watercolours.

Oak House residents, at Belong Macclesfield, starred in their humorous winning entry themselves, holding up messages noting what the best part of Christmas is to them, in an effort not dissimilar to a scene in Yuletide favourite film, Love Actually. Whilst some enjoy the bringing together of loved ones and dressing one's home for the occasion, others are keener to don their favourite seasonal jumper and make headway with the opening of gifts.

The digital cards were shared with customers, families, and others in the community connected with the villages, as well as Belong's sister sites across Cheshire and the North West, whose customers were also invited to take part in the annual contest.

Supporting Local Causes

Belong Macclesfield observed World Kindness Day by collecting food and drink contributions for local foodbank, CORE Pantry, before colleagues dropped off donations and leant a hand volunteering a day's work running the pantry and its cafe.

Fabienne Donbavand, Pantry Leader, wrote to the village expressing their gratitude: "Your contributions directly supported our families and helped us to maintain our core values of hope, dignity, and choice. Your staff members were all friendly, willing to step into any task provided and hardworking. Thank you for your generosity."

Pictured: Back row: Gina Titley (Practice Development Facilitator), Andrew Chadderton (Bistro & Catering Manager), Cheryl Davies (General Manager), Chris Kelly (Experience team)
Front row: Helen Marsden (Support Manager), Laura Barsted (Care Team Leader)



Fun of the Farm Comes to Belong Crewe



Pictured left: Sylvia Moss enjoys the visiting farm



Pictured right: Resident, Jeanne Barry.

Belong Crewe recently transformed the village into a mini farm for the day, playing host for a special meet-and-greet afternoon with animals from all over the world.

Swiss Valais blacknose sheep, Chinese Silkie chickens, and Pygmy goats joined the Brookhouse Drive community, as did miniature Shetland ponies, French Lop rabbits and hairless guinea pigs, with Belong customers petting the creatures, finding out all about them, and in some cases, taking on the role of looking after them.

Mobile Farm Cheshire was called upon to facilitate the animal assisted therapy, with Belong Crewe's resident and tenants also invited to try something new, forge fresh friendships, and enjoy a sense of camaraderie looking after their guests.

In addition, it proved to support the wellbeing of those living with dementia, as Jessica Butler, Experience Coordinator at Belong Crewe, explains: "Animal therapy provides the opportunity to socialise without the need to engage in conversation, so our customers with little or no verbal communication could join in, too. It gave them a sense of companionship whilst offering mental stimulation – they really got a lot of it, and everyone left with big smiles and happy hearts."



Pictured: Residents enjoying the Scottish celebrations.

A Fantastic Burns Night Celebration!

Residents, tenants, Experience Day customers, and visitors came together for a memorable Burns Night filled with Scottish tradition and great company!

The incredible Malcolm Smith from the CCC Pipe Band set the scene with his fantastic bagpipe performance, creating an electric atmosphere. Guests enjoyed traditional Scottish snacks, all perfectly paired with a refreshing glass of Irn-Bru.

Even our team members couldn't resist getting into the Burns Night spirit—laughter, music, and plenty of fun made it an afternoon to remember!

Home Safari Brings Joy to Belong Wigan!

Residents at Belong Wigan recently had an unforgettable afternoon with Home Safari Animal Assisted Therapy in The Venue.

From fluffy and cuddly creatures to more adventurous animal encounters, customers had the unique opportunity to hold, interact with, and learn about a variety of fascinating animals. The experience was filled with smiles, laughter, and plenty of memorable moments—everyone loved every second of it!

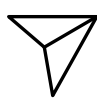


Pictured: Belong Wigan residents (top L-R) Sheila Chappell, William Woodcock, Greta Marsden (bottom L-R) Peter Hopkins, Julie Robinson and Joan Larkin.

#Join us

We are pleased to invite the Belong community to join us on Instagram to keep up-to-date with life in the villages and with the Belong at Home teams.

Keep us posted with what you get up to by tagging us in your pictures and videos (just remember to get permission before you capture other people in your happy moments!).



Follow us by searching @belongvillages on your Instagram account or scan the QR code with your smartphone or tablet for direct access to our page – see you there!



BELONGVILLAGES