

**Intro:** The River House Trust is a community based centre in Hammersmith for people living with HIV. It has roots that go back to the early days of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, when the late father David Randall formed a charity called Cara, which merged with River House in 2018. River House provides a wide range of services for those with HIV, who often live lonely and isolated lives. Today, combination therapy drugs have greatly improved survival rates and River House's emphasis has switched to supporting people as they grow older with HIV. Beverley Lord is one of the River House Trust volunteers who in her words 'chaperoned' the group who stayed at Woodsford Castle for their 50 for Free stay. In this conversation, she tells Caroline Stanford what the stay meant to them.

**Caroline:** So, Beverley, let's start. Tell me, tell me a bit about your relationship with the River House Trust and what the River House Trust do.

**Beverley:** Okay, so about five years ago I had been made redundant. And the job centre said that I should look for some volunteer work, which I then went to the volunteer centre. I really did want office based work, but they were going through a list and they came to the River House and said, 'Well you won't want this one.' And I said, 'why not?' And he said, 'because it's people with HIV'. And I said, 'Well, why wouldn't I want to go there?' So I said, 'I'll take it'. I just said, 'I'll take it'. And then I was interviewed over the phone by three separate people. And then I went in to meet Alex and Chris. And Chris decided yes, you know, she's good for our over 50s, so we'll take her on. And I've been with them ever since.

**Caroline:** The Woodsford stay that was that 2020?

**Beverley:** That was this year because that was when lockdown started. And we all thought, wouldn't it be great if we had to stay here? [Both laugh]

**Caroline:** Well you did very well to get it in before lockdown hit. And the River House Trust looks after or supports HIV sufferers, doesn't it?

**Beverley:** It does they, they're an amazing charity. They really are.

**Caroline:** And the people so the people who went to Woodsford Castle...

**Beverley:** I'm like a chaperone to... I've got my group. That's what I call them and I always call them clients. So, but one of the directors came when one person had to leave early. So he popped in to see what it was all about. See how everyone was and he thought it was fantastic.

**Caroline:** And so tell me, sort of an outline of your clients who came?

**Beverley:** Well, a couple of them would never probably leave London. And this is the whole thing, is to encourage people to come out meet up, give them a chance to literally, you know, be around other people because a lot, not a lot of well, I think a lot of them do, they lock themselves away thinking that they shouldn't be out. You know, it's really it's so sad, but I love it when I can get someone to come on the day trip or one of our you know, visits to the Shard or the Tower of London. It's really great and they love it and then it makes them more confident to come out again. And the group that I'm with are all over 50 but the majority of them are, I'd say more near 60 and over and some of the younger ones. The younger ones, I say younger ones - 40s, they haven't even told their family. They've been suffering this for years. And I just, and the way Chris treats everyone.

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He's, I think he's a really fantastic humanitarian and the staff. You know, I don't think they could work unless they had the volunteers.

**Caroline:** No. It must be a very, very difficult isolating condition to live with HIV and it's so sad to feel that they have to be ostracised when there's no reason really is there.

**Beverley:** I know there's, they still have that awful stigma. And when two of the group found out that I wasn't HIV, they were shocked. They were absolutely shocked that I would be there volunteering. Once a week before COVID, I think they're starting to now but obviously they're having to distance people; they would have food every Thursday, you know, lunches. Well they were having lunches every day, all that had to stop. And some of the funding, they've just lost so much funding. So some things that had to be cut as well, which is, yes, it's sad.

**Caroline:** It's the knock on effect of everything, isn't it? And so normally would you take clients away for holidays?

**Beverley:** Yes. I mean, because I'm their chaperone, they have to have someone from River House. But normally because, you know, some people don't want to go, some people can't go. The groups are smaller. But what Chris does try to do is share everything. Say, 'Well, you know, you went last time, let someone else go this time'. And everyone, they're all really good about that. They really are.

**Caroline:** Yeah, and how many how many clients does the trust have in total? Would you say?

**Beverley:** I don't know exactly but there's a lot.

**Caroline:** So tell me, how did you travel? What did you think when you arrived? What was it like opening the front door?

**Beverley:** So when we was like, 'Oh my goodness', and everyone was like, 'Wow'. We couldn't get in at first because we couldn't open the door. We had the key, the lockbox, everything was perfect, but we just couldn't open the door. Does it go in this door; does it go in this door, does it go in. And in the end we had to call, and the young lady came and she just took the key and turned it. And you know, it was like, oh, my goodness, it was that easy, but we just couldn't open it. And then when we got inside, wow! Their little faces, you know, it was just ...like they were just like scampering mice and just running around looking and then looking at the rooms and like, 'Oh, I love this room, oh, I want this room'. It was just, it was a pleasure to see them... they couldn't believe they were there. Yeah, it was lovely.

**Caroline:** That's what we hope.

**Beverley:** Yeah, it was lovely. And then, so they all got settled, to do or go and get settled. We made some tea, cups of tea and things like that. And then I said, 'Does anyone wants to go for a walk?', because it's all countryside. And some of them can walk, some of them can't. And so it was, there was, I just, I think it was just they couldn't believe that they were there, and how wonderful it was. And the history, you know, it looked older than it was, as well with all that wonderful stonework, the way the rooms were laid out, and it was, and they were, it was immaculately, immaculately clean. And I'm picky and, you know, when people are staying, especially if they're vulnerable. I just, it was immaculate. I was really impressed.

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**Caroline:** And how did you how did you deal with catering and things was that?

**Beverley:** Everyone, everybody in actual fact... I thought that I would be, you know, cooking. And they, but no, no, no, because, you know, they were just like, deciding what they were going to have, and they would go into the village or go to another village, just to see what types of shops there were and things. And then every time we went somewhere, they bought food. And so we have this tonight, shall we have that tonight, and everyone contributed their bit. And everyone contributed in cleaning up. And it's really nice also for them, because again, it's the interaction that they're not getting at home. And after our days out for those who wanted to go, we, everyone was around the table talking about their day and what they saw and all the photographs they took. It was honestly, it was a real pleasure that week, we didn't want it to end.

**Caroline:** Did they know each other before they went or were these friendships being formed during the stay?

**Beverley:** No, because they knew each other, I think they know each other from River House. So there wasn't anyone there that that they didn't know.

**Caroline:** And so and what did you do on your on your days out then?

**Beverley:** We went to Thomas Hardy's cottage, Clouds Hill, which even I...the Seven Pillars of Wisdom, I didn't realise what a humble man T.H Lawrence was. And or T.E Lawrence is it? And we were very, very fortunate because they were closing it and it was the last day that they were going to open it and so they really enjoyed that, plus of course, it's right next to the army and the tanks were going up and down and they sit there for ages watching the tanks. Lulworth Cove, I mean we drove all over the place and we went down to see this swans. So one of them wanted to go to see the swans, and so it was it was an action packed four days really.

**Caroline:** It sounds brilliant; it sounds really lovely. And do you think, so coming back, is it something? Do you think it's made a lasting difference for people coming back or?

**Beverley:** Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. What can I say about Landmark? Just giving the opportunity to all the people that are out there that you know, just would not have a chance or any idea that they could do something like that. I just think it's really a wonderful thing to do for people. You know, because a lot of them are under the, you know, on the poverty line. And they never go on holidays and just to have something like this.