How did you start volunteering?

When I retired, I decided that I was going to spend more time doing things that were important to me. By chance I started volunteering for the local witness support scheme, which I found fascinating. I got so much out of volunteering. I found myself developing new life skills, as well as helping to do something that I felt was important and made a difference.

I saw an advert for the Read to Me scheme in the local paper and thought “I could do that”. I’ve always been an avid reader. I thought about how awful it must be if you loved reading but weren’t able to. I saw it as an opportunity to share my passion for reading, and to give people an opportunity to continue to enjoy and get pleasure from reading.
What are the visits like with the people you read with?

I’ve now read with two people, both in their nineties. The first was a charming, lovely lady, who was going blind and could no longer read. She found out about the scheme when she was borrowing audiobooks from the library. At the beginning, I read short stories to her, but we then progressed onto longer books. I’d read a chapter or two to her every week, and we’d pick up from where we left off the following week.

She was a fascinating woman who used to be a matron in a hospital. We’d end up spending the first half hour or so each week just chatting, and end each visit talking about the things we liked or didn’t like from the various stories. This led to us reading stories and books that neither of us would have normally chosen. The experience broadened both our outlooks.

The gentleman I am currently reading with isn’t able to get out and about very easily. He doesn’t have such a good short-term memory, so we don’t read longer stories which would take longer than a single visit. He’s still reads himself, and we talk about the books he’s been reading, but if I read to him, he tends to forget really quickly. Sometimes it’s different when you’re sitting and listening to someone as opposed to reading yourself. He’s a big fan of thrillers, and he always tells me about the latest Dick Francis novel he’s been reading.
We started by reading short stories together, but as time has gone on, we’ve found this more difficult and he finds it harder to stay engaged. It’s really important to be flexible. You have to respond to each person as an individual, and do what’s right for them at the time. We’ve started reading poems - funny poems, or little stories that are in the form of poems, which we’re really enjoying reading together. Sometimes we just sit and chat, and he always has some great stories from his own life to share – he was brought up in a bakery in Cardiff, fought in the Second World War and lived in Rio for a number of years, where he got married and had children.

What difference does it make to the lives of the people you read to?

It’s a simple way to help people to continue doing what they love doing and what is important to them. It brings a little bit of the outside world into their homes if they can’t get out, and gives them someone different to speak to. When you’re spending time with someone around a shared interest you make a connection with them. It’s about creating companionship through reading, not just having someone read to you. Consistency is important. Having the same person come back each week allows you to get to know each other and be comfortable and relaxed in each other’s company.

It doesn’t just benefit the person you read with, it also supports their family and carers. I cared for my Mum, and know from personal experience how important it was for me to be able to have a break sometimes. Knowing that you have someone trusted with your loved one is priceless – it allows you to go out and take some time for yourself. You can go away and do something for a couple of hours and not worry. It was my day off when the carers came in. It’s something I always appreciated so much, and it’s great to be able to give something back.

What do you get out of being involved?

You get to meet new people, make new friends, and make real connections with people. For the people I read with, I’ve become part of their extended family. I’m made to feel so welcome. They involve me in various family activities, so I’m meeting new people, and we all support each other. It’s never a chore, it’s just an enjoyable visit. I get to sit and chat, read, hear people’s stories, have a cup of tea and sometimes even a bit of cake!

I discovered that both myself and the gentleman I read to love musicals. One afternoon, rather than reading we decided that we would watch the Sound of Music. When I arrived, the family had laid out a spread. It was like a proper afternoon out at the cinema, and we both had a great time.
It’s so easy, and it’s mutually beneficial. For just an hour a week of my time, I get so much in return. I love to feel useful, it keeps my mind active, and I get to meet amazing people.

**Do you have any advice for someone who might be thinking of volunteering in their community?**

Find something you love doing. It doesn’t have to be reading, it could be cooking, gardening, sport, dancing or anything. Then look to see if there’s a way to meet up with someone with similar interests.

Volunteering with an established project is a great way to get started, as you’ll get loads of support and assistance. Having the support of the library with Read to Me is great - they do all the boring admin stuff, leaving you to get on with doing what you love to do. If you find something you think looks interesting, ask if you can tag along with someone already doing it. This can help you decide if it’s right for you.

For me it’s like visiting friends or family. It feels like the most natural thing in the world! It’s so much fun and I can’t imagine not doing it.

**For more information on the Read to Me scheme run by Torfaen Libraries, phone 01633 647 676 or email cwmbran.library@torfaen.gov.uk.**

**Literature Wales is helping establish a national befriending scheme based around reading called Reading Friends. For more information, phone 02920 472 266 or email post@literaturewales.org.**