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*Charlie*

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## Charlie, 89



in supported housing



favourite food:  
chilli-con-carne with  
a sprinkle of Tabasco



loves:  
designing  
gadgets



looks forward to:  
mealtimes and weekly  
outings with Walt

*"I've had a fantastic career... I've done numerous jobs and travelled with them; most of the time on my own."*

Charlie is a fixer and an inventor. He helped to build the first computer in the UK and has 2 or 3 patents in his name. Even in retirement, he has continued fixing, making and inventing, setting up a number of companies in the meantime. He spent most of 2014 in hospital due to problems with his knee, and has since been realising that he can't do as much as he used to. He misses regular company and sees his son once a week.

Charlie was one of the scientists involved in building the first computer in the UK, working alongside Alan Turing. His computer is now displayed in the Kensington science museum. 'They got in touch a few years ago and asked if I could make it work again. It wouldn't have fit into a room 3 times this size, plus a room for a generator. Now I have a laptop that's 10 times better and runs off a battery!'



He was offered a role as a consultant for the American Embassy, travelling around the US supporting companies that wanted to automate their operations. Throughout this period he continued designing things on the side. **'The first thing I made was called the Dimdapter... you could plug it into the main socket, you could use it for dimming your lights. It's both a dimmer and an adaptor. That's how I came up with the name.'**

To make it easier to travel around America, he decided to get a pilot's license. This meant that he was often on his own, flying from city to city, hotel to hotel. As a consultant it was hard to build relationships with people.

## Family

Charlie was married with 3 children. He moved to America when his children were about 15. **'My wife didn't want to come to America. We had two children and she insisted that they be educated in the UK. In the end I had a divorce and that was it.'**

His eldest son sadly died in a car accident when he was in his early 30's. His younger son is a successful businessman and his daughter has followed in her father's footsteps and runs a computer business; when she was younger she used to love going with him to visit his computer.

## Retirement

Charlie retired at 60 and moved to Spain for about 5 years, in order to be closer to his daughter who lived in South Africa. Shortly after this his daughter moved to Canada. When he was in Spain he set up a company that repaired TVs and when he moved to Glasgow, with a lady friend that he'd met out in Marbella, he set up another company that did the same thing. Living in Glasgow, he **'got a bit bored'** and so started teaching at a local college - **'teaching in Glasgow, can you imagine! They were friendly with me, not with others – they had knives and all.'**

When his father and his father's wife died, he moved to their house (that he had bought them) in the Lake District. In the lakes he would **'go down to the local tip and buy a stack of televisions, repair them up and sell them. That kept me going. I wanted something of interest to me.'**

Although he knows how to cook, he usually ate out or, if he was at home, would make microwave meals.



## Life now

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### Summerville

When he was nearly 80, Charlie wanted to move into some sort of supported living facility near to his son, however the transition was not easy; 'you feel as though you have gone off the edge of the cliff when you get to a place like this'.

Summerville has undergone a lot of change over the past ten years. When he first moved there, there were seven people working all day every day, 'now it's just one on their own. It's a bit hard for that one person to handle 14 people.'

He also feels that the residents have changed. They need much more support and he doesn't have much in common with them.

Charlie gets on better with the Summerville staff than he does with the residents. 'I suppose it's because I've been with younger people most of my life and I haven't really had to deal with people of my own age...' He talked about how some of the residents have now started helping out in the garden, watering the plants; 'It's something they look forward to now. Whereas before they were just sitting and doing nothing. I've always got something on my mind in terms of wanting to do something.'



*"I used to talk to people because they had things in common with me. But they've been bringing in people (I shouldn't say it) but all they ever talk about is Coronation Street... I come down and talk to 2 or 3 of them. They all think computers are out of this world and of course it's been my life and still is in a way."*



## Designing, keeping busy

One of Charlie's life passions has been to design, fix and make. Even when he first arrived at Summerville, he acted as an informal maintenance man for the place. He also took it upon himself to redesign the buildings hall lighting system, in order to make it more energy efficient.

'I went down to Loughborough market last Christmas and someone had a box full of watches, I paid him 10 pounds or something and I took all these watches and repaired everyone of them and I gave everybody that was around a watch. I can't do quite so much now.'

He has also made a herb garden for the chefs to use. His favourite chef uses them regularly, and he is working on the other one to start using them more. 'I thought it would be useful for them and it was something for me to do.'

It's been difficult adapting to his age, and realising that he might not be able to do as much as he used to be able to do. 'Nowadays I have a job getting off the floor. When I lie down on the floor to put down the cables I have a job getting up again... I don't call anybody to help me but occasionally I've thought "how the heck am I going to get up from here!"'

Charlie has customised his bedroom to both meet his needs and to keep himself occupied. He has made pockets and shelves out of cigarette packs and other gadgets. He has also made four different remote controls; 'there are remote controls everywhere! I can put my light on at my bed. I've got controls for all the gadgets I've got - I can stop the fan.'

Computers are very important to him and to keep up to date with the industry he receives computer magazines and listens to computer books on his tablet. He uses his computer every day to get in touch with old friends, manage his bank accounts, check on the weather and buy gadgets on Ebay. He isn't able to do design work on his computer anymore.

Charlie goes into town from time to time on his buggy (and then the bus) to do some shopping. He also enjoys walking and sitting at the local cricket pitch which is just behind his room. Over the past few years it's become harder and harder to get out and he thinks he 'ought to be doing more exercise.'

He used to have a carer that he went out for dinner with sometimes. Now, every Friday, the father of the chef at Summerville takes him out for a drive. 'Walt comes every now and again and chats with me... We usually go to one of the restaurant places around here where you can get coffee and we have a tuck in.'

His son comes in every Saturday morning to see him for a short amount of time and feels let down by this. 'If he's got the money, let him live well. But I've only been invited once to his house in 10 years.' He is no longer in touch with eldest son's wife and children.

*"I miss family life I really do, I mean I've joined in with families at various times and have had quite a time. But I would prefer to have had a family round me... It's not the same when it's not your family. It's better if you know people."*

## Hospital experience

Charlie spent most of 2014 in hospital. He had needed a knee replacement and it became infected so they needed to replace it twice. He spent 3 months without a knee, waiting for the infection to clear. This was a traumatic experience for Charlie. He found that he was always on a different ward, with different doctors and often being told different things. Other patients would come in for three days, have their knee replacement and leave so he didn't have a chance to get to know them.

*"There's no newspapers, there was no television, there was no radio and I couldn't connect my computer. I was getting to be absolutely... I couldn't use any of my senses. Couldn't get out of bed. It was driving me up the wall."*

He also found the food difficult to manage. He ended up eating just rice puddings and fruit, occasionally supplemented by an Indian meal- 'those weren't made in a hospital- the rest of it was really bad.' As well as not enjoying the taste, eating a meal in the hospital bed was very difficult; 'I didn't get any help, I could handle the hands alright but it was awkward to eat the food. If you got a baked potato they were hard to cut and if you're in an awkward position in the bed. You can't hold yourself solidly.'

"Eventually I got myself out because I couldn't take it any more; both food and service. I called my son and said get me out of here. Everyone in the hospital said no, no, you can't go, you either stay here and have what we're giving you or we take your leg off. I said no way. Either of them. If it's a matter of fact, I'll live for another 6 months and let it go. I didn't mind that. Well I've had nearly 2 years and I'm walking faster than everybody!"

Over this period in hospital, Charlie lost 2 stone and hasn't put it back on even now. Now he eats 'like a horse' and the chef gives him a large plate whilst all of the other residents eat off small plates.

## Asking for help

Charlie doesn't like asking for help and is lucky that he has been generally healthy. A few weeks ago and in the middle of the night he had a sharp pain in his heart that lasted for hours. He didn't tell the doctor about it, even though he had to go and see the doctor about his blood pressure.

*"I don't call the doctor if there's anything wrong unless I can help it. I don't believe they do a good job... I've always kept myself fit and well without having to bother them."*

He has also had a few falls over the past few years and often feels quite dizzy when he stands up. All Summerville residents are given an emergency button to wear at all times in case of a fall or other emergency, however, Charlie isn't sure if he'd use it.



## Charlie & food

**‘The choices of what we eat are made in the kitchen rather than in the countryside’** but efforts are made to please everyone, for example, they have a sheet of paper to keep track of everyone’s dislikes and will let residents know what is on the menu either on the day or the day before. Each resident receives lunch and dinner every day and is responsible for their own breakfast and snacks in between. Charlie is the only resident to have his own microwave and fridge and often will take leftovers from a meal back to his room.

It’s important for Charlie to help out at meal times, which also means he gets special favours from the kitchen staff. **‘I stand at the counter and she dishes and I take it to the tables so I do help them as much as I possibly can even now. That’s why I got a bit of extra’.** Sometimes he will also be given leftovers to take back to his room and have later. He has also been made special meals on a few occasions, although he doesn’t want the other residents to get too jealous.

*“Really I can only think of mealtimes [as a highlight], the other times I’m reading in my room or if I come up in the morning and have coffee with them... That’s really my life at the moment. Whilst I’m in here.”*

Charlie isn’t a fussy eater; he likes vegetables and adventurous flavours, particularly spicy foods like chili-con-carne; **‘for me it’s good to have some sort of variation. Some taste. At my age you lose some of your taste buds’.** He’s found he uses more condiments than he used to and when it’s a spicy dish will often bring his own Tabasco bottle and **‘sprinkle it all over’.** He has a favourite chef who puts a lot of imagination into her cooking and uses lots of the herbs that Charlie planted in pots in the garden.

The other residents aren’t always so open to trying food and often a lot goes to waste; **‘I get a bit impatient in my own mind because I can eat anything. Especially when I take something to the table and they say “I don’t want that.”’** He also finds it hard to understand how he is the only one that helps out, especially as there is only one staff member working. **‘It is an awful lot of waste. I don’t like to see the food being wasted.’**

Charlie compares his attitude to food to the other residents who he feels take food because they have paid for it, rather than because they would like to eat it.

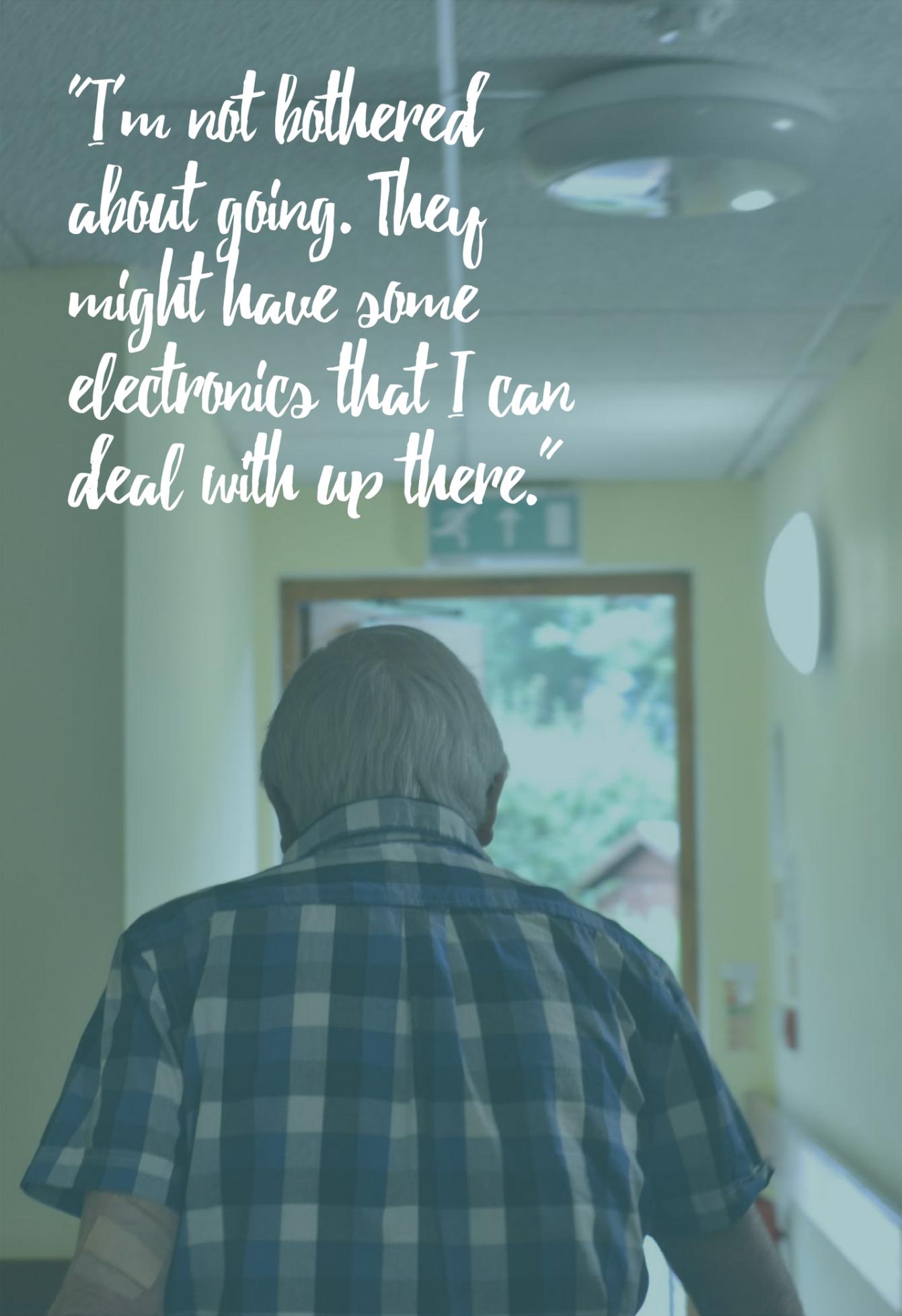
**‘They give everyone a banana and I can go down to my room and I eat one every day. I come back and go into the kitchen and there are three or four bananas that are allowed to go black. People take them because they think they’re paying to be here so they might as well. And then it gets wasted – now they’ve started putting a dish of fruit out and people can help themselves if they want to. Before they came and gave you one. I think less people will take them...’**

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## Thinking about the future

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"I haven't got anybody not really. I know my son would only do his usual duty in coming over and seeing me once a week. I want to go. When that thing went in my heart there I thought 'oh well I'm going. I'm not worried about it, I've had a fantastic life so if I go in my sleep or if I go anyhow I'm not too bothered! I would have to get a carer come in. I'd have to pay for a carer. But I don't want to do that unless I can help. I'd hate to think that someone would want to bath me or wash me..."

A photograph of a person with short grey hair, seen from behind, wearing a blue and white plaid shirt. They are standing in a brightly lit room, looking out a window. The room has a white ceiling with a circular light fixture and a white wall with a framed picture. The overall tone is soft and contemplative.

"I'm not bothered about going. They might have some electronics that I can deal with up there."

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# Charlie

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Food for Life Better Care works with care settings, hospitals and in the community to tackle malnutrition and loneliness among older people. Good food and enjoyable mealtimes can dramatically improve health and wellbeing, and aid recovery from illness or surgery. However, supporting older people to eat a nutritious diet, and to drink enough fluids, whether they reside at home or in care, can sometimes be a challenge.

In July and August 2016, we conducted research with older people in Leicestershire to understand their day-to-day experiences of food. This story was kindly shared by Charlie.\*

\*Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.