



A CAREFREE BREAK FOR AN INVISIBLE ARMY

Evaluation

April - June 2025



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BENEFICIARY COMMENTS:



“It was a total pleasure to meet you both at the weekend. Thank you so very much for making us feel so at ease, and we had a super fun time. I really enjoyed all our chats, including hearing about you both, and your approach to your work. We can't wait for everything that's to come!”

“There's so much to thank you for. From the most incredible experience when you joined our family, to seeing you again on the night out - you're really amazing people, and we're truly privileged to welcome you into our home and life.”

“Thank you also for giving us this really special opportunity to share our story. Your photos are amazing, and your story is wonderful.”

“It was nice talking with both of you. I am grateful that you feel our story is worth telling.”

“They're such beautiful vignettes and it really feels like getting to know them all and seeing the reality of care, in a sensitive yet unflinching way. There's such depth to this project, but done with a lightness of touch. It's spot on. And the endings - the [Carefree] break - feel so important: a powerful shift in narrative and perspective. Well done!”

ABOUT INVISIBLE ARMY:

Invisible Army is an arts for social good organisation founded in 2019 and registered as a CIC in February 2023. Their goal is to use the arts to shine a light on carers (unpaid). They want to make the challenges and joys carers cope with every day, visible. They do this through photojournalism exhibitions - both in real life and online - where their raw and beautiful images are coupled with a story, all of which are made in collaboration with the carer and their families. In this way they are able to amplify the voices of carers and those they care for.

Invisible Army is run by Tina, a photographer and Carina, a writer and carer. Carina was a young carer, supporting her disabled parents and continues to care for her mother in her adulthood. They have collected 58 carer stories and counting, including Carina's own, and shared them through many exhibitions which have been viewed by the general public, professionals, local politicians and carers.

Invisible Army has a unique way of working, going to carers' homes and spending time with them and the person they care for. In this way, they witness and document a true picture of care. Invisible Army then returns to the carer and their families to edit the photographs and stories together, into a piece everyone is proud of.



“People think I choose to be a stay-at-home mum. That couldn’t be further from the truth. I feel like I’ve lost my identity. This is not what I thought parenthood would be for me. Jayden relies on me for all aspects of his care. He needs my help with everything. I do his various therapies throughout the day. There are lots of things that go into our day-to-day which surpass that of the average stay-at-home parent. I’m constantly having to guess what Jayden wants and needs as he doesn’t have the language to tell me. When he’s crying and clearly frustrated it’s so hard to know what I’m doing wrong. I have no choice but to stay positive and meet Jayden’s needs,” she shares, “But some days I’m so tired I could cry.”

- Extract from Nia’s Story (parent carer)



ABOUT A CAREFREE BREAK FOR AN INVISIBLE ARMY PROJECT:

Working alongside Carefree - a charity transforming vacant hotel rooms into vital breaks for full-time unpaid carers - we collected six carer stories in London, consisting of photographs and words in collaboration with the carers and their families. Invisible Army spends from a couple of hours to a full day with each carer in their home. We listened, laughed, danced, photographed and cried as they and their families shared what caring means to them. Tina Gue (photographer) edited the photos and Carina Andrews (writer) wrote a short piece from the stories shared.

Carefree arranged for each of the carers to have a break for the night at St Giles Hotel in London. Since 2023, St Giles Hotel has donated an amazing 206 carer breaks. Tina and Carina met with each carer to hear and photograph what the break meant to them. After further writing and editing, the first draft of each carer story was ready to show the families. Carina went back to London to meet each carer and their families at their homes. Carina read the first draft of their story aloud. They then edited together to get to a final story everyone was proud of. Carina laid out all the photographs taken by Tina, and the carer and their family were able to take out any they were not happy with and choose their favourites. The final story was complete and consent forms were signed.

Thanks again to St Giles, who then hosted our launch of this new touring exhibition consisting of these intimate carer stories. Thank you to the carers and their loved ones who courageously shared their stories with us. In conjunction with Carefree, we hosted a drinks reception for the carers, their families, invited guests and Carefree's valued hotel partners. The walls around us were covered with the carer stories, beautifully capturing the everyday challenges and joys of these remarkable individuals and what goes on beneath the surface of care. They also showed the profound impact of a break for carers, and how Carefree made a difference to their lives.

These stories and photos will continue to tour through Carefree's partner hotels. We encourage everyone to experience these inspiring stories firsthand and help us raise awareness about the invaluable role of unpaid carers.

“I’m actually quite nervous about the one-night break I have coming up,” shares Mitelia. “I don’t know how Jay will manage emotionally. I won’t be able to help them regulate.” Jay does not like being away from Mitelia. Most, if not all, of the couple’s time is spent together. Mitelia explains, “As an introvert I sometimes have to say to Jay that I need 10 minutes on the sofa alone to recharge, but that’s the furthest I’ve been from them in a while.”

- Extract from Mitelia’s Story (carer)



OUTCOMES:



- Individuals identified themselves as carers
- Carers learned about the local support available to them
- Carers felt their story was seen and heard
- Carers had access to a break from their caring role
- Carers felt empowered to continue to share their caring story
- Friends and families of the carers involved, hotels and the general public gained a better understanding of a carer's needs
- Further breaks were offered to carers
- Carers were able to connect with other carers
- Potential new hotel partners that attended the exhibition have since committed to becoming a Carefree Breakmaker and gift more hotel stays to carers.
- Each of the stories had between 450-650 views on Carefree's social media. These were the most viewed posts Carefree had this year. Mitelia's story is the most viewed with 895 views.

STATISTICS AROUND WHY THIS PROJECT WAS IMPORTANT:

5.7 million people in the UK are providing unpaid care (Carers UK, 2025). Carers are the invisible backbone of our healthcare system, providing 80% of homecare in the UK and saving the public purse £184bn a year (equivalent to the entire NHS budget). Yet most of us are unaware of their extraordinary contribution and how this issue will touch our lives at some point (Carefree, 2025).

With an increase in the proportion of carers caring for more hours, it is vital that carers get a break, yet many feel unable to do due to the costs involved. Unsurprisingly, given the rise in the cost of living, a significant proportion of carers are worried about their ability to manage in the future. Even more carers are cutting back this year compared to previous years with 58% of carers sharing they had cut back on hobbies/leisure activities (Carers UK, 2023). 68% of unpaid carers are unable to get a break from their caring role when needed (Carers Trust, 2023).

This is a deeply worrying trend that suggests that risk factors for carers' health, wellbeing and loneliness are increasing. In previous surveys, 8 out of 10 carers said they had felt lonely, with nearly one third feeling lonely for all or most of the time. Prior to the pandemic, 46% of carers in Carers UK survey providing substantial care had not been able to take a break and during the pandemic, 72% of carers did not get a break at all. The Census 2021 in England and Wales found that about 1 in 4 carers reported 'not good health', compared with fewer than 1 in 5 non-carers.

Over a third of carers (36%) said that not knowing what services were available was a barrier to accessing support (Carers UK, 2023).



"Caring is both the hardest thing we've ever done and the most transformative," Shurron says. Kel nods and adds, "It's mainly hard because of the underfunded systems, the barriers to support, and society's failure to value it... which is wild because every one of us exists because someone cared for us, so surely it's one of the most valuable types of work?"

"And it's also profoundly beautiful," Shurron continues, "but we rarely hear about that side of things because it's always framed as sacrifice. Our journey as carers has revealed depths of love, creativity and resilience we might never have tapped into otherwise. It's like caring has given us a lens through which we view life, where we see magic in moments we may have otherwise overlooked."

- Extract from Shurron and Kel's Story (parent carers)



Carefree's THOUGHTS:

“Thank you so much for sending over the photos – they’re absolutely beautiful! We really appreciate all your help, both with last week’s shoot and with the project overall. It’s all come together really nicely, and we’re so pleased with the result. It was great working with you [Tina] and Carina!” - Miruna Harpa, Director of Delivery at Carefree

“Collaborating with Invisible Army was something I'd wanted us to do since they released their first exhibition. No-one else in the care space was telling stories like they were - so real, so intimate and so authentic, because of their co-creation process. It was a joy to work with them and I hope they get the recognition they deserve for the service they are doing for the caring community.” - Charlotte Newman, CEO at Carefree.



www.carefreespace.org

When Sarah was offered a gifted hotel break by carer-charity, Carefree, she invited a friend who has been a crucial support to her throughout her caring journey. Together they made full use of the space and time they had there - watching a theatre show, going for afternoon tea, shopping and finishing off with a spa treatment. Her friend said, “Sarah seems completely different from just a few weeks ago when she hadn't been able to leave her parents side – or even their house - for a full month. It’s wonderful to see her relax and start to find herself again.”

“It’s a bit of a front,” Sarah replied. “I’m putting on a smile so we can enjoy this break - really, I feel exhausted and very emotional. But I’m enjoying my break very much. Such mixed feelings but I’m so grateful!”

- Extract from Sarah’s Story (carer)



LEARNING:

These are points we need to refine for our next project:



- To think about the process of consent when working with an organisation. Do organisations get to read the pieces before going to the families for consent? Current process is: Carina writes the story, which is then proofread and sensitivity read, after which the carer edits and signs consent. The story is then shared with the organisation. However, if the organisation wishes to make any edits, the story has to go back to the carer and the proofreader. This may be the best way to ensure the carer is signing the specific story which will be used. If this is the way we will continue going forward, this will need to be added to the budget and timeline and the carers will need to be made aware we may need to come back to them.

- If writing about the impact of something on the carer (like a break), we need to meet with the carer a week or so after the event, so they have time to reflect on it first
- At initial conversations, try to establish a clear purpose/focus of the stories with the organisation we are collaborating with. It is important to us that it is led by the carer and that they share what they want to about their caring role, but we are happy to ask specific questions if the organisation we are working with wishes
- To think about whether to ask carers if they wish to read their story so they have time to digest it, before we meet to gain their consent.
- To ensure time to research support in the carer's area if needed
- What we offer works well. Not only do we meet our aims, but we can also be flexible to meet the aims of the organisation we collaborate with.

“Caring has taken over my life,” Rieanna said. “I miss most of the fun, the time in the sun with my friends. By the time I’ve done everything everyone needs, the sun is setting, or my friends have finished their plans. I try to coordinate things to see them, but it’s not easy.” Over the last few years, she’s been diagnosed with IBS, other stomach issues and fibromyalgia, which she puts down to the stress of carrying these roles.

Rieanna has never been able to claim Carers Allowance. Although it takes more than 35 hours a week to care for her family, she has always earned over the threshold. In two years, she will turn 40 years old. “I want to start living for myself, explore who I am outside of caring - finally!” she said.

- Extract from Rieanna’s Story (Carer)





NEXT STEPS:



Touring Hotels

The exhibition created will be touring around hotels that are in partnership with Carefree for the public to view.



Touring Public Places

The exhibition will also be toured by Invisible Army to various locations including but not limited to, shopping centres, carer events, hospitals and libraries.



Sharing Online

The six stories have also been shared online on Carefree and Invisible Army's website and social media.



Future Offering to Organisations

Invisible Army hopes to continue to offer organisations two options to collaborate, each ending with an exhibition: one which involves creating new stories local to them; one which centres on using our existing stories.

During the break provided by Carefree, Ally and Nazlee went shopping, went out for dinner and then finished the night seeing a theatre performance. “The show was really wonderful,” said Ally. “I felt like a superstar. This one simple break away from caring has really given me a boost to start to look after myself. Being a carer has been so challenging at times – we were so grateful for this opportunity.” Nazlee added, “We both had a very good time - we enjoyed every minute of it.” She laughed, “We cannot wait to have another break.” “It really helped decrease our stress levels,” agreed Ally. “We’re definitely going to try to take more breaks.”

- Extract from Ally and Nazlee’s Story (parent carers)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Invisible Army would like to thank each one of the carers and their families for allowing us into their homes and lives. Each moment we spent with each one of you was truly a privilege. We will be forever grateful for your generosity, honesty and kindness.

We have also been exceptionally impressed with the leadership and staff team at Carefree. We are very grateful for the leap of faith you took to work with us at Invisible Army, and for your efficiency, humanity and trust. It was amazing to be able to work with you, offer something wholesome to each carer and create a beautiful exhibition and celebration with you. Thank you.

Our thanks also to St Giles Hotel for hosting breaks for the carers and our exhibition launch. And to each guest who attended our exhibition launch.

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