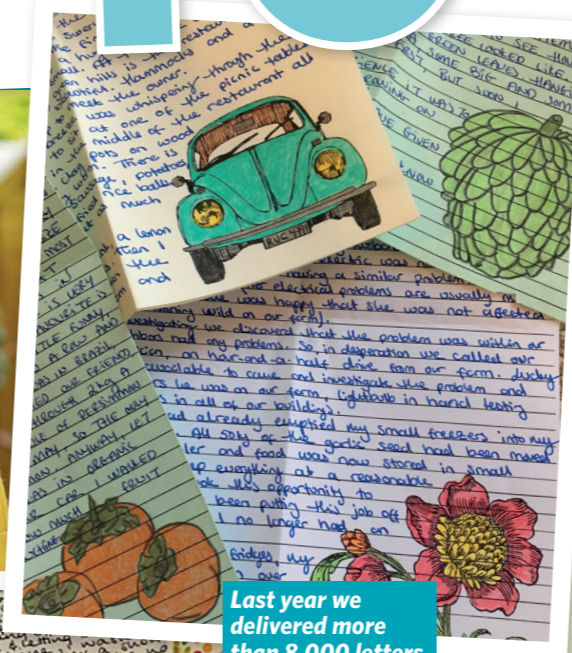


FROM ME TO YOU...

When Alison Hitchcock, 53, from London, found out a friend had cancer, she supported him in a unique way.



Brian and I became best friends



Last year we delivered more than 8,000 letters



We run workshops with letter writing tips

Gently placing my palms together, I took a deep breath and slowly counted to five. As I gently let the breath out through my mouth, I opened one eye and peeked around at the group.

I was on a yoga retreat in India, with a group of people I'd never met before, and I was loving it.

They were all pleasant enough, although I couldn't see any of us being life-long friends.

There was one particular bloke, Brian, who I thought seemed a bit flaky and annoying.

He didn't seem to think too much of me, either.

But back at home in the UK, we all decided to meet for a catch-up.

Around six months after we got back, on our third meet-up, we were sat round the table when Brian piped up.

'I've got bowel cancer,' he said.

Everyone went quiet. Then everyone started speaking at once.

'I'm so sorry...'

'My cousin had cancer, acupuncture helped...'

'Have you tried green juice...?'

Everyone was coming out with kind words and helpful advice, but I had nothing to add.

'Oh my God, what am I going to say?' I thought.

I felt so awkward.

But suddenly, I heard a jumble of

words coming out of my mouth.

'I'll write letters to cheer you up,' I said.

Everyone looked round at me.

You weirdo, what have you done? I thought. *You barely know the guy, how are you supposed to cheer him up?*

Before going to India, I'd worked in a fast-paced corporate job in the city.

I wasn't a writer – the most I'd written was a 60-word note to a lawyer or accountant.

'That'd be lovely,' Brian said, smiling awkwardly.

Back at home, I felt ridiculous.

Well, I said I'll do it, so I guess I have to do it, I thought. The poor bloke's got cancer, it's the least I can do.

So one night, I poured myself a glass of wine, sat on the sofa and started writing.

I scoured my brain for funny anecdotes, anything to try and make Brian laugh.

And as my pen flowed, I realised I loved it.

It was nice to take an hour to myself to do something creative.

It was a calming experience.

Most of what I wrote was complete nonsense, but as I rambled away I found it therapeutic.

I've got low iron levels, so I've

been eating loads of spinach...

I went to a hot yoga class but it was horrendous, I was a big flump sweating everywhere...

My mum's started doing Tai Chi, she says she can see energy between her fingers...

I barely mentioned Brian's cancer, other than to say I hoped his radiotherapy was going OK.

When I'd finished, I popped it in an envelope, and I posted it to Brian the next day.

A few days later, I got a text message from him.

Thank you for your letter, I loved it, he wrote. But I don't think I can reply right now.

Don't worry, I wrote back. There's no need, they're for you.

I'd never expected Brian to respond at all – he had enough on his plate – but I was glad the letter had brought him some joy.

So I wrote another.

And then another.

They were all full of trivial things

about me and my life.

I tried my best to make them funny for him.

And although I'd started writing them to help Brian, I realised they were helping me, too.

I was sharing a vulnerable side of myself that I hadn't shared with anyone else, and telling him stories I never would have told him if we'd just met up for a coffee with the rest of the group.

I've started saving your letters for my radiotherapy sessions, to make me smile, he text one day.

I was so happy he was getting something out of them.

Years went by, and over time, through our letters, the two of us became best friends.

Brian's cancer progressed to stage four, and over nearly three years as he battled it I wrote him more than 100 letters.

As Brian got stronger and started on the road to recovery, we met up

I tried to make Brian laugh

WORDS BY HANNAH CROCKER. IMAGES: SWNS

amazing achievement for the charity.

We have a thank-you service for recipients, too.

The feedback we get, from both the senders and the recipients, is really very touching.

When a recipient gets in touch to say how much they loved their letter, that's definitely the most rewarding part for me.

For the price of a stamp, we can completely change someone's day.

And they changed my life and Brian's, too – thanks to writing

letters, I gained a best friend.

This year it's the charity's fifth birthday, and we've got big plans.

We're planning fundraising events, asking people to write five letters or raise five pounds.

We want to connect with and help more people than ever.

I know we can do it!

Brian says:

When I first met Alison, I thought she was quite aloof and not really my sort of person to be honest.

We didn't seem to have a lot in common, and if it hadn't been for the group meet-ups, I don't think I'd have ever seen her again.

When Alison first said she'd send me letters, I was struck by her offer, but I did think it was a bit odd and I didn't really think she'd see it through.

When the first one arrived I was a bit flummoxed by it, but I enjoyed reading it – I was glad she wasn't expecting a reply.

But Alison's letters became

an integral part of my recovery from the cancer.

I saved them for when I felt low or lonely – my partner and friends were so supportive, but when people were at work and I was stuck at home with daytime telly, too sick to go out or do anything, the letters really helped.

They made me feel normal, and gave me a glimpse into the life I hoped to get back to when I beat the cancer.

I got a best friend, and we set up a charity together.

I'm so proud of everything we've achieved.

Visit the website: frommetoyouletters.co.uk

inspired by the letters, I did an MA course in creative writing.

In 2016, we were recorded for a podcast on Radio Four, and we told the host all about the letters.

'You should do something more with that,' she said.

'You're right,' I replied, my brain whirring away.

A few days later, I rang Brian.

'How about a charity?' I said.

And just like that, From Me To You was born.

The idea of the charity was to encourage people to write letters to cancer patients in hospitals or hospices, to brighten their day.

Initially, it was just something for us to do in our spare time.

But it quickly took off and took over our lives.

I was overwhelmed by how popular it became.

We held workshops, giving people letter writing tips to help loved ones stay connected.

Then people started approaching

more in person.

'Your letters meant so much to me,' he said. 'Everyone else just wanted to talk to me about cancer, but your letters gave me something different to focus on. They made me feel normal.'

'I'm glad I could help, even in a small way,' I said.

In 2013, Brian got the all clear, and we both got on with our normal lives again.

I married my husband, Ben, and Brian even came on my hen do.

Brian went back to work, and