

After signing up to be an NHS Volunteer Responder, retired gas engineer Barrie Church has been a stalwart steward at Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust's (CCS) large-scale Covid vaccination sites since January 2021.

Last month, the 80-year-old received a Platinum Champions Award. Together with the Royal Voluntary Service (RVS) President, HRH The Duchess of Cornwall, and in partnership with The Big Jubilee Lunch, the awards are an official Jubilee project to celebrate outstanding volunteers across the country who are making a difference every day.

Thousands of people aged from 16 to 101 from all over the UK and supporting a range of causes were nominated and from these nominations, 490 volunteers were hand-picked by a judging panel presided over by HRH The Duchess of Cornwall, and crowned Platinum Champions, each receiving a specially designed pin and a signed certificate from HRH The Duchess of Cornwall. Here Barrie shares his story...

"I signed up to become a volunteer with RVS just before the launch of the Covid vaccinations because I wanted to help the NHS fulfil their task. The idea of being a Responder was also of interest as I enjoy talking to people and particularly wanted to help the elderly and housebound. My wife had also been admitted to a care home with dementia and volunteering gave me a sense of purpose in my life.

"My role involved speaking with lonely and depressed people as well as collecting and delivering food parcels and medications, and I soon discovered that not only could I bring a bit of sparkle to the lives of those in need, it also made me happy and more appreciative of the things I had.

"What upset me most was the large number of people who said they were depressed and lonely, some of whom I called on a regular basis, and we always parted with a laugh and 'keep safe!'.

"The collection and delivery of food parcels was always a delight. The look of relief on the recipients' faces, some old and some young mothers with one or two babes in arms, made it a joy to do!

"I started stewarding at the City Care Centre vaccination site in Peterborough when it opened in January 2021, before moving to the East of England Showground and now I'm based at Queensgate.

"Working in the vaccination centres has at times been extremely arduous. I remember right at the start we were cleaning every seat after use and were flat out all day, with very clean hands and bent backs! At other times I was out all day in the rain and wind manning the car parks.

"Inside the centres, every visitor was full of praise for the volunteers and staff, and I can honestly say there's never a dull day or one where we don't have a smile and a laugh with the patients!

"A particular memory was a guy in an electric scooter who had driven for nearly an hour through wind and rain. He had no gloves, and he was frozen to the core, but he didn't want to miss his vaccination appointment. When we got him inside, we found he was a week early and plied him with tea and biscuits. In normal circumstances, he'd have been sent away, however after a number of phone calls, approval was given to vaccinate him and my what a smile he had on his face when he left to go home!

"I also remember a lady in tears who was very depressed. She lived in a caravan, and it was very cold with thick snow, and I made her a cake and took it round to her. Even the sun came out when I chatted to her in the snow, and she had tears of happiness when I left!

"An 11-year-old boy came in for his job pushing his very disabled mother in a wheelchair. He was so proud and wouldn't accept any help from us. His mum must have been so proud of him. We all had tears in our eyes, but there was nothing we could do to help him. It brought home to us what a hard life it must be for these young carers.

"I think volunteering should be expanded. Maybe older children and university students should be encouraged to work in the community? It could be with Cubs, Brownies, in ambulance stations, local clinics, schools, hospices, care homes; it doesn't always need to be litter picking!

"Many people aren't keen to get involved but there's always someone nearby who's alone. I visit a chap every day for 30 minutes for a cup of tea and a chat, and I might check some of his post for him and make sure his cottage is clean and safe. In return, he does errands for me when he goes to the shop, and this makes him feel needed. I also cook him a proper meal each week and we always share a laugh together, so volunteering really is a win-win situation!

"I'm now employed by the NHS and donate my wages to a number of charities. Most of them go to Market Deeping Model Railway Club to enable them to build a lift for the aged and disabled.

"Sadly, my wife died of Dementia during lockdown, and I also regularly contribute to Evergreen Trust in Stamford who support local aged and dementia patients.

"It brings me joy knowing I'm making a difference to the lives of others!"