Larry & Josie, 75

have lived in their home for 40 years

favourite food: dark chocolate! (Josie)

love: their allotment (Josie)

look forward to: the next trip in their camper van
“We bicker all the time, it keeps our brains going!”

Larry and Josie are in their mid-seventies. They have lived in their house, in a small village just outside Leicester, for the last forty years. “I’ve said we wouldn’t stay here as long as we’ve lived here. From the day we moved into this house. Forty years later, I’m still here!”
“The only payment I get is from up there...”
The village

Larry and Josie seem very involved in the life of the village. Larry has been the church warden for the last 6 years. As the church warden he is the key holder, and has to set up the church for weddings, communions, funerals, and weekly masses. It’s a voluntary role. He feels it’s quite a big commitment, and plans to retire from it this year. “He said that last year and the year before!” says Josie. He admits that he might not be able to if they don’t find someone else to replace him. It is clear that Larry likes keeping busy. After he retired, he went back to working for another 6 years, doing research for Ipsos Mori.

Equally, Josie seems to have taken a central role in the community. She has set up a knitting group, as well as a weekly lunch club, which anyone can attend for a £3 fee. “I just thought we could do more with the church.” The lunch club is mostly attended by older people, but sometimes also by young offenders. Josie calls them the “naughty boys” but has empathy for them: “You can see that all they need is a mother. Or at the very least someone to give them a hug.”

Despite their involvement in the village, they make a clear distinction between themselves and “the villagers” - people who have grown up here and generally have all their family living near by. Larry and Josie have 3 children and 3 grandchildren, but don’t see them as often as they would like to. One son lives in Manchester, and the other lives nearby but commutes to London and works late shifts in the City. He only visits family only once a year. They use Whatsapp to keep in touch.

Despite the fact that they seem to have a very active life and some good friends, Josie mentions feeling a isolated, and that she would like to be involved in more cultural activities. Talking about one of their neighbours, Josie says: “He chats to us at the allotment, but he wouldn’t invite us for a cup of tea.” To which Larry replies: “Yes, that’s true, but we wouldn’t either.”
Adventure

There is an adventurous side to Larry and Josie, which they seem proud of. Their camper van is parked outside the house, and they use it several times a year to go on trips across the UK and beyond. This year, they went all the way to Fuerteventura. “The campervan before that looked like a box of biscuits when you folded it down.”

This sense of adventure can be linked back to the time they met, 46 years ago. Larry was working in East Africa as an engineer. Josie was a midwife in the UK, engaged to a man. When she found out that he had gotten another woman pregnant (one of the women she was looking after!) and called off the engagement, her supervisor put her in touch with a family friend Larry who was living in East Africa (who also happened to be a baby her supervisor had delivered years earlier). The two wrote letters to each other for ten months and when Larry returned to England for a trip in November, they had the chance to meet in person for the first time. Six weeks later, they were married.

Keeping active

Larry and Josie are both retired, and enjoy keeping busy. On top of the lunch club and the knitting group, Josie goes to Egyptian dancing classes - “I just love the music! It’s so relaxing. I tried African dancing, but that was too fast! But Egyptian is good. Every time I go I lose myself, forget about my worries. And it doesn’t matter how good you are.” Larry presents his own radio show for the local hospital and plays the tuba in a brass band twice a week. He also recently completed a BA from the Open University, where he got the chance to learn about a lot of different subjects. “I really enjoyed optics. It’s a fascinating subject. If I had to choose a career again, I would probably go into that. But that’s too late now, isn’t it?”
Josie’s illness

The main source of anxiety in Josie and Larry’s routine is Josie’s illness. Josie was diagnosed with tuberculosis when they were in Kenya, though she reckons she picked it up from a patient when she was working as a nurse in the UK. Her lungs have been fragile since, but she managed with her condition for more than 20 years. However, 18 months ago, she caught an infection, and hasn’t been able to get rid of it. She compares her symptoms to cystic fibrosis.

“They can’t seem to kill the bug that lives in the bottom of my lung.”

The illness is quite distressing, as it gets in the way of all the things she’d like to do. On bad days, she has to stay in bed. If she does too much, she gets a bad cough and tires quickly. Managing it is quite intensive: she takes her tablets in the morning and in the evening, and when it is really bad, she has to take intravenous antibiotics. She prefers to take them herself at home.
even though it makes her quite nervous, because she doesn’t want to be stuck at home waiting for a nurse to come or to stay in hospital - it can take up to 1h of treatment 3 times a day. “I haven’t done very well. I’m on constant antibiotics. I’ve had 3 lots of intravenously and this will be the fourth one... It is a bit frightening, but I know there are other people worse off. I’ve just got to think that. When I went to the clinic yesterday there were some older people there, you know, hardly breathing! And I thought is it what’s coming?”

“I know some people who’ve got it, but they don’t really understand. They tell me pace yourself and things like that, but they’ve not got the infection! They’ve got the condition, but not the infection. And that’s the infection that’s holding me back. If I could get rid of that, I think I could move forward a bit better. Then I could manage it a bit better.”

Josie is unsure about how her illness will evolve. She wants to be able to manage it, but feels frustrated by the fact the infection has not settled down, and that there doesn’t seem to be a solution.

“I try not to [think about the future]. I always work on the theory that I will die first and therefore I’m not going to think about it. I’m only slightly older than [Larry] but I’ve gotten a bit frightened since I became ill. I went to ask a consultant what the prognosis was. He said well, I could die this weekend or the next few days. Well that’s not helpful. That’s not really what I wanted to hear. I wanted to know how to manage the condition. I suppose we could all suddenly die, couldn’t we?”

Because Josie takes responsibility for most of the housework, like cooking or cleaning, when she is unwell, this doesn’t get taken care of. She wishes Larry would do more. But she says he is not a practical person. “He is too academic! I think it’s because he came from a posh family. They actually had someone doing everything for them! I said to my mum about wanting 4 kids. She said: ‘You’ve already got 4!’ But I suppose I love him.”
Josie and Larry have adapted their diet because they want to lose weight as well as to adapt to Josie’s medication. “We thought if we had a late breakfast and an early dinner, we could cut out the snacks... Because with the tablets in the morning, you can’t have any milk two hours before and two hours after. So I’ve been trying to go for that two hours afterwards. Because we are not early risers anymore now. Between 8 and 9 we get up. So I try to do something to take my mind off it, because I would want a cup of coffee... So then I decided I’ll have a late breakfast. But then I have a lot for breakfast, I don’t just have a snack. And we’ve brought forward the meal to about 5.30 instead of 6. But we’ll have a glass of milk and a banana before we go into bed as well. I used to have really severe cramps in my legs, so the potassium in the banana helps. And I’ll have the milk then because I’ll have had my tablets at about 8, and I’m going to bed about 11. The milk sort of gets me through the night then. It’s like a food and a drink, isn’t it? If I was not on the tablets, that wouldn’t happen. I’ll have breakfast around 9, then for lunch, a soup or something...”
Josie’s infection does impact on their routine, as she is usually the one who cooks, always with fresh and sometimes homegrown ingredients. When she can’t find the strength, Larry will usually heat up microwaved meals.

When she is unwell, Josie also tends to comfort eat. “I’m quite good till about 2 in the afternoon... Then I just comfort eat. I get fed up because if I can’t do something, so I go for the chocolate... I like chocolate. I’m not bothered about anything else! Fruit cake will stay there forever. But anything with chocolate on it. Mostly dark chocolate though. I start by having one piece, and then two, and then I think: now that I’ve eaten that much, I can eat it all!” She does not seem to feel too guilty about it though, because it’s dark chocolate. “Actually, we are advised to have a couple squares. Because there is something in it that clings onto the mucus and that helps to cough it out. So it’s good for you! So that’s my excuse! That came from a nutritionist when I was at the hospital.”

Larry and Josie are quite aware and interested in the nutritional value of food. At some point, a friend of Larry bet £5 that he wouldn’t be able to give up sugar for a month. At the end of the month, despite the fact that Larry had successfully avoided sugar, his friend refused to give him the £5. “He said to me: ‘You’ve saved £5 by not buying all the sugary stuff!’”
The shopping list

Their food routine has changed over the years, especially since retiring. “I think we got a bit lazier. But we still have people who come over for dinner.” They have also changed their shopping habits, to adapt to their reducing appetite. “Your appetite changes, but metabolism slows down, so you don’t lose any weight. Now we shop every other day... We found that we’re wasting food. Because we would decide to go out, or I wasn’t eating because I felt ill. So now we have a meal for that night, and then one for the following day. I find we spend less money now doing that. While when I went for everything, we were throwing stuff away!”

Their shopping list consists in “always veg and some fruit, either blueberries or strawberries, whatever is in season. Always chicken, probably some mince.” Both agree that when it comes to food, Josie is in power.

Josie I’m not that keen on asparagus.
Larry And I love asparagus! You see, this is the Northern stomach...
Josie We don’t eat anything in this house if I don’t like it. The only reason you eat anything at all is because you always buy things that you like in secret. There are always things in the basket that weren’t on the shopping list!
Larry Only tins of soup!
Josie And?
Larry I didn’t buy any beers this time.
Josie There were 2 other things that you got that weren’t on the shopping list!
Larry It wasn’t from the clothes department was it?
Josie No.
Larry Go on, what was it?
Josie I don’t know, I can’t remember, but it wasn’t on the list.
Simple recipes

Josie is the one who cooks, partly because she enjoys it, and partly because she doesn’t trust Larry in the kitchen. “Mostly, he makes a mess!” Larry says: “If I’m cooking she is standing over me with a wooden spoon.”

Josie’s style of cooking is often improvised, and it is clear that she is a confident cook.

Josie  I start off with a recipe and adapt it. Then after that I’ll make it all up! Or sometimes I’ll just look into the fridge and do whatever.

Larry  Yes, I don’t think you’ve come up with any recipes that wasn’t edible.

Josie  Well, I’ve had the odd failure. But normally I can make a meal out of nothing!

She does have a few trusted recipe books, which she likes because they explain simple, basic, reliable recipes. “This is the one that we bought when we got married 46 years ago. It’s really good. I rely on it a lot. I use the chilli con carne recipe a lot. This is the second copy of it because the other one was so well worned! If you are not used to cooking, it tells you everything. Because with some of the new ones, you try the recipes, and the ingredients are things you’ve never heard of. And then you buy £3 for a jar, and you never use it again!”
For Josie, good food means fresh food, preferably homegrown and homemade. Taste comes before health, even if they seem really conscious of the nutritional value of some food: bananas for potassium, butter and full-fat milk because our bodies absorb it better than low-fat or non dairies alternatives “which are full of added sugars to make them more palatable.”

They are also aware of and interested in alternatives to mainstream supermarkets. They order fairtrade tea and coffee, and speak with enthusiasm about the food coop one of their sons is part of in Manchester.

Josie and Larry have also grown their own food for some years now. They grow potatoes, strawberries and raspberries in their allotment, and runner beans, courgettes and tomatoes in their back garden. Getting an allotment was partly inspired by Josie’s
grandfather, who used to farm his land really resourcefully during war times. Josie has fond memories of working alongside her grandfather when she was a child. She would like to spend more time working on the allotment, but her illness has gotten in the way this year. She has gotten a friend to look after it, but is sad about not being able to do it herself.

Much like the church, the allotment seems to be a social hub, fuelled by a spirit of friendly competition. On the day we visit, one of the allotment owners and shows us with pride a marrow larger than a toddler. We then dig up an extraordinarily large potato. We set it aside for it to be weighed. On the way back Josie has an after-thought: “Because he didn’t show us his potatoes, I’m sure he has a bigger one. I might go to the shop and buy the biggest one I can find, just to annoy him!”
"I like to go down there early when there's nobody there. Otherwise it's just all these old men telling you what to do!"
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 Larry and Josie*

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