



Personal message: Lyn Brenner laughs as she opens her talking card.
Photo Neill Reed

Talking cards bring smiles to hundreds of faces

By David Melsome

A community project has been surprising volunteers and people living on their own by sending them greetings card that actually talk to them.

Messages to thank them for their hard work, to say 'thinking of you' and even to tell jokes are recorded into a tiny memory chip inside and can be heard every time the recipient opens the card.

The project has been set up by Co-op member pioneers in Barnet. They identified nearly 500 people they thought deserved a personal message and approached David Hyams, managing director at Talking

Print in Southgate, who donated the cards for free.

One was Lyn Brenner, who has Parkinson's and has been volunteering for the Barnet branch of Parkinson's UK, based at Avenue House in East End Road, N3, for more than 10 years. She fundraises and makes about 100 support calls every fortnight to fellow sufferers. Co-op member pioneer Neill Reed said: "Lynn is an inspiration to so many people. She was so thrilled with her card that she asked if she could have 20 to send to members of Parkinson's UK, which of course she did."

"The cards are plain white, ready to be decorated and personalised by the sender. Inside you write your own message and record a 30-second message. People say they have provided some memorable moments in the long and lonely lockdown."

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Twin sisters play their part in fight against the virus

By Vicki Bradley

In March I was unwell for 14 days with some of the Covid-19 symptoms, including a tight chest and difficulty breathing. Some days I couldn't get out of bed.

My identical twin sister, Alison, and I had agreed to be involved in TwinsUK research into developing a Covid-19 symptom tracker, and I tracked my symptoms on that. Although Alison was staying with me in East Finchley, she was unaffected.

Off go the samples

In April, we were asked if we would help further by taking part in a study to help develop an antibody test. Of course, we said yes; we've been taking part in their studies since 2012, as we believe their health research is valuable to all of us.

We were used to going to St. Thomas' Hospital to be tested, but this time two nurses, dressed in gowns, masks and gloves arrived at my house. They took saliva samples, nose swabs and three vials of blood from both of us. Surprisingly, the nose swab was the most uncomfortable.

The nurses were visiting two other sets of twins before taking our samples back to the labs. I was impressed with their bravery in going into people's homes, but they wanted to help discover a tracker app for this virus.



In it together: Vicki Bradley (right) and her twin sister Alison.

We got our results three weeks later, and were surprised to find that we had both tested negative. It was a relief knowing we hadn't infected others, but it also meant that we haven't faced the virus yet, and you can't help but wonder how your body would react.

The developed antibody test for Covid-19 seems to be working well, and I hope a vaccine isn't too far away. Lockdown

has been difficult, but the rate of infection is dropping, and we're all doing our part to save lives.

TwinsUK

Tracking your symptoms on the TwinsUK app each day, even if you're feeling fine, helps to identify areas where Covid-19 might be resurging. The app is available to download on any Android or Apple device, and you can learn more at <https://twinsuk.ac.uk>

Tree and fungus in perfect harmony

This exotic-looking fungus was spotted on a tree in Deansway, N2. We asked local naturalist Linda Dolata what it might be and here's what she told us:

It is a bracket fungus with the colloquial name Dryad's Saddle, aka *Polyporus squamosus*. It is the fruiting body of the fungus and its presence means that the tree is riddled with tiny white threads known as hyphae forming a network, or mycelium, throughout the tree.

If you look at the underside of the bracket then thousands of tiny white pores are visible (hence the genus name polypore), and it is through these that millions of minute spores will be released on a dry windy day to disperse the fungus. The spores have no food store as such so very few will find the



The tree fungus in Deansway. Photo Mike Coles

exact habitat that they require to begin the next generation.

Trees can exist quite happily for many years with fungi, which are an important part of their ecology. Oak trees, for example, will send new roots down their cores if they have been turned into decaying wood by, say, the beefsteak fungus (another bracket type). This

helps them recycle some of the nutrients from the no longer productive wood.

All trees have associations with many underground symbiotic fungi called mycorrhiza which hugely improve the tree's uptake of water and nutrients, whilst the fungi benefit from the products of photosynthesis. Nature is amazing.

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