Hello and welcome to 21 Talks, a podcast series from Housing 21 that's challenging the way older people are represented and talked about in everyday conversation.

**Jill:** My name's Jill and I'm a resident here at Box Tree Court – not for very long, I've been here just over a year, and I think perhaps I'd like to give you a little bit of information about how I came to actually reside here. Firstly, after my husband died two years ago, I decided to downsize. And during the process of downsizing, someone mentioned to me the idea of living in a pre-retirement home. I wasn't very keen initially, and they said “well, this Housing 21 is building a residential pre-retirement home just around the corner”. So, I thought, “well I'll go and have a look and find out what it's all about”. And then they said, “with extra care, assisted help”. And I thought, “well, I'm getting on a bit”, to put it mildly. And so therefore, I thought, “that sounds as if it could be something that I'd be interested in”. I don't need it at the present time, but I thought I might in the future, and I thought that it would be a good option. So having looked, I decided it was the place for me and I've been here for just over a year, made lots of friends.

We've had a very, very challenging year with Covid and so on, but I like my home, I'm happy with my home and I'm very pleased to be here. So today I'm joined by Steph Lee, who I know quite well as our manager, who works here as a housing and care manager at the court. And also, Jamie, who I briefly met actually who's the head of quality assurance and commissioning from Housing 21.

Now today is something that I'm really interested that we're going to be talking about, and that is how we're striving very hard to professionalise the care industry – which needs it, particularly as I once worked in the field, and I ran an occupational health department for one of the largest corporations in the country for over seven years. I've also been involved in training for over seven years and in personnel recruitment, apart from working in the voluntary sector as well. So many areas, so of course, this is very of interest to me, particularly.

Before we get started, I really want to know first is something about both of you. And so perhaps you could tell our listeners about your individual roles within our organisation.

**Steph:** Hello, everyone. I'm Steph Lee and I'm the registered Care Manager here at Box Tree Court. So, my role is all about making sure we're running a safe service for the residents, overseeing the housing side, and basically making sure that they get in the person-centred care that's needed. I've worked very hard over the past year to get Box Tree Court to where it needs to be.

**Jamie:** Hi, everybody. I'm Jamie Lindon-Lewis and I'm the Head of Quality Assurance and Commissioning at Housing 21. So, I've worked at Housing 21 for almost seven-and-a-half years now and worked in a couple of different roles in that time. My responsibility in this role is essentially care quality, so making sure that the care we provide to our residents is of the highest quality and also complies with our regulatory responsibilities, and we achieve that through a number of ways. So production of policies, procedures, help to share out the training that our care workers and our care managers receive.

**Jill:** Well, can you tell me a little bit more about your own career progressions? Because I'm sure it's very different. What have you been doing in the past and what do you hope to do in the future? Steph?

**Steph:** Yeah, so I've actually never done care before until three years ago where I had a very poorly little boy who did undergo heart surgery and I felt I needed to make that separate between him. He was very reliant on Mum, so I decided I was going to go back out to work. My friend mentioned they were building a new extra care scheme in Doncaster, which is where I live. I cared for my grandad, sadly before he passed away and I got a lot of joy from that. So, I thought, do you know what? I'm going to go for it. Went to the interview, was successful and started as a Carer there. Quite quickly it was clear that I enjoy paperwork and I like making sure everything is in order. So, I started to help out in the office on days where I wasn't providing care. Not long after, I was offered a role as Assistant Care Manager, which I was there for a year and a half, nearly two years. Absolutely loved it, loved having the responsibility and being able to help the manager get to the standard the scheme needed to be.

It then came up that there was a position available to help here at Box Tree as a medication coach, as it was identified that this is one area Box Tree was struggling in. So, I offered to support, which I did for around about a couple of months, and then was asked if I would like to interview for a secondment position, which for me at the time is a fantastic idea. So, I've always wanted to progress but didn't quite know whether I was ready. So, then it's, kind of, the chance of being able to try out the job, but still know you've got your job to go back to if it didn't quite work out. So, for me, it was a no-brainer. I was offered the permanent position July last year and haven't looked back since. I really, really wouldn't want to work anywhere else. I'm very proud of my progression within the company and a lot of that is due to the fact that the company has supported me and pushed me to be my potential that I can be, and they've always backed me. So, I really can't ask for anything more.

**Jill:** It’s so important actually, Steph, to have a company which does support you in your progression.

**Steph:** Absolutely.

**Jill:** What about you, Jamie?

**Jamie:** Yeah, so I left school and I went to sixth form. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do with my career, so it was either get a job or go to university, and I really wanted to be independent and work. So, I took the decision to look for work, but I was really confused about what I should do. And of course, I thought about all the obvious things: working in an office in admin or sales. And I had a friend's sister who was a nurse and she suggested to me becoming a male nurse. At that time, there were very few male nurses and it wasn't something that I'd ever thought about. But at the time she said, “actually, you'll never get made redundant, you’ll have a good pension in the NHS, why don't you give it a go?” So, I decided to apply for my Access to Nursing. But before that, I knew I needed experience in a care environment. So I found a job – in the local paper – as a Care Assistant, working in a care home for people with a high level of dementia. Applied for that role and got the job, and I did that for a few years before quickly being promoted into a senior carer role.

And for that role it was very much being responsible for managing the shift and administering the medication to residents, obviously in the care being provided to people. And I absolutely loved it. And very shortly after, I was given an opportunity to be the Deputy Manager, and I was very young to be a deputy manager, so at that point I was around 20, and there were 39 beds and I took up the role as Deputy Manager, managing quite a large team and I absolutely loved it. We used to get paid £3-£4 an hour, we used to get paid cash in hand on a Monday, so it was nothing to shout home about, but I absolutely loved it. Some of the best days of my career, really.

But after doing the Deputy Manager role for some time, I realised I could do more, and I reached a point where I could stay where I was because I loved it, I was happy, I was content. But, being young, I realised I needed to push myself and make myself feel slightly uncomfortable and go and do something new. So I moved on to a role at the local authority, and that was managing a team of rehabilitation assistants, mainly for older people who had fallen or had strokes and live at home.

And my role was to bring that person into rehab for up to six weeks, then my team and myself to work with them, to re-enable them and hopefully help them return home with a package of care. So I did that for some time – only about a year. And it wasn't my most favourite job I've ever done, to be honest. I think it's because the turnover of residents was so high, you never really got the chance to establish relationships with people. And I was used to seeing the same residents all the time, knowing them, knowing their families.

So, I decided I want to go back into a residential care setting, and I got a role as a registered Care Home Manager and that was managing a home in the Walsall area, the Midlands. And that's where I really began to spread my wings. I was there for almost four years, managing the home, being responsible for compliance, people's care, managing and recruiting into the care work teams. And, again, that was one of the best jobs ever. I really, really loved it.

So, once I've done that, I decided again I needed to push myself to do something different. I then moved into the extra care sector. So, I worked for another extra care provider for almost six years, initially managing some of their schemes, and then I moved on to an area where I took responsibility for other schemes as well as my own. And then I came to Housing 21, and at Housing 21 I was an operational manager for three-and-a-half years, managing schemes in Walsall and at Sandwell. And then I applied for this newly created role, at the time, as head of quality assurance commissioning, and here I am today.

**Jill:** Thank you. I just want you to tell me a little bit more about it – what exactly the Extra Care Academy is going to do.

**Jamie:** So, the Extra Care Academy is something I'm really excited about. We've been through a really challenging time in the sector with COVID, and now we're coming out of that we recognise that that period of time was great, in a sense – for the first time, our care workers and our employees were truly being recognised for the job they do. Prior to that, I think people saw care as a job you just fall into or a job you do when there's no other option, and that's absolutely not the case. We've always known that and I think the outside world also is starting to see that. But we recognise there is much more work to do.

And the one thing that we as a team at Housing 21 have talked about a lot: if you don't work in the care sector, you don't always realise you can have a really successful career. If you want to come and work in care and be a care worker and that's where you want to stay – that's brilliant. That's absolutely great; of course, we’ll enable that. But, actually, if people want a really fulfilling career in management, we want to be able to support that and provide a way that people can access management posts to do it really successfully, but also for them to be fully equipped to make a real difference. So, the academy is very much aimed at giving our entry-level workers, our care workers and our cleaning staff an opportunity to take a route, a development pathway, into a management position within Housing 21.

**Jill:** And how will you actually do this training?

**Jamie:** So, the academy is a two-year programme and it will be a mix of classroom training, the relevant vocational qualification and, for me, the most important part is on-the-job training. So quite often – although we've been really successful in Housing 21 in terms of enabling our employees to succeed and to have a really great career, Steph is really a good example of that – we, sort of, see that the real learning is once you're in the job. And that can be a real challenge, that once you get into a management position, you've also got to be a fantastic manager, but also learn as you go. So we want to flip that on its head and actually equip people to be a really great manager and leader before they even get into that job.

So the on-the-job training really is an opportunity for someone in the academy to go away to a different scheme that they're not familiar with and learn the job. For instance, an Assistant Care Manager, we want them to be in those schemes learning how to do that role, how to do it really well. And, for me, the most important thing is they will also receive coaching from a more senior manager because, for us, the skill set is really important. But actually, we want people to consistently display our values and our behaviours. And through that coaching approach, we hope to support people to be able to do that.

We're really excited. I think it gives an opportunity for people to clearly see a clear route in Housing 21 into a really successful management career. And we're very much looking forward to the first cohorts starting in September.

**Jill:** Jamie, could you explain to me whether it's for one particular role within the organisation that you're going to train, or is it to look at the broad spectrum of all the roles within House In 21 under the training process for getting qualifications and progressing?

**Jamie:** Absolutely, it's for the whole spectrum of management posts. So, we want to achieve to get to a position where when you enter Housing 21 and you see a management position – it could be in housing, it could be in care, for instance – that you want to do, the academy will enable you to get to that position. The way we see it, working slightly more in the future is: there will be a very clear progression route to the academy to get to a senior management position. So, for instance, if you're already working as a Housing Care Manager like Steph, and your aspiration is to be an area manager, for instance, we want the academy to enable those employees also to enter senior positions. So absolutely it covers a whole spectrum of management posts within extra care.

**Jill:** I think that is absolutely marvellous to actually hear from my own experience, actually, sort of, the value for the care workers that I've met and the way that, you know, they have coped during the Covid crisis, particularly here – as I can only speak about what has happened here – that it’s so important that they do support the staff, themselves and the individuals or residents in particular.

And in many cases, I've had examples of this where funny things have happened. At one occasion just at Easter, I heard a knock at the door and I opened the door – and we were all staying in our rooms at this particular time and we were unable to actually speak to each other very much – and there when I opened the door was a giant bunny. Now it sounds sort of a funny thing to see, but it was the care workers trying to cheer us up, because we were stuck in our rooms and not being able to, sort of, go to the bistro or do anything, and just seeing somebody there with an Easter egg for us to cheer us up was marvellous.

And then, again, I've seen some of the work that's been done in the past here with one of the girls who have been cleaning, and she did it for me at one time, and she has shown that she's interested in progressing further, and I've heard and seen that she has been trained to actually do other roles, which I think is absolutely great. And as an ex-trainer, I'm so happy to see this kind of thing happening. So, yes, I can see that, actually, something like this I would support it wholeheartedly because there is so much that can be done – and needs to be done, I have to add, because we once had problems with various things, but I'm sure that these can be overcome. And I hope from a personal point of view that Housing 21 at Box Tree Court can become a centre of excellence in the future. I hope you agree with that.

**Steph:** That's the plan!

**Jamie:** Oh, I love that. I totally agree.

**Jill:** Great!

**Jamie:** But I think you've raised a really good point, Jill, that for our Care Workers, people often think of a Care Worker in terms of providing personal care – and of course, that is a really important part of the job – but it's also our care workers providing emotional support to people, to the residents and to their families. And that's something that people don't always recognise.

**Jill:** I have seen that actually, Jamie actually, because it is so important. I know on one occasion – I cannot mention anyone’s name – the support that was given to somebody who was going through a very emotional period of her life, and still is, and sitting with her, talking to her, helping her. It made a great deal of difference to that person and that is so important. And also, people who've never seen this, and myself including, and not knowing very much about what a care worker was or what their job entailed. I've been able from the side-lines, if you like, to observe some of these things and finding it very refreshing that there is much that is being done that is taken for granted and not fully appreciated by, perhaps, the public, because they just do not know what happened.

And maybe we can get this out so that other people in schools and other organisations such as you, Jamie, and people going back to work, actually looking at the care industry and saying, “there's a role for me there and I can progress there” as Steph has done and the same as you, Jamie, you took an opportunity to look at what was happening and found a marvellous role for yourself and you're still progressing, and that, I think, is absolutely wonderful.

**Jamie:** Yeah, I agree. I have a vision and I always think to myself, in 15 years’ time, I'd like to look on LinkedIn and see all the CEOs in the social care sector and hopefully some of them have come from our academies. So that's my vision in 15 years’ time we’ll have lots of CEOs out there who all started their management career at Housing 21.

**Steph:** I think it's so important to work for a company that supports that and enables that. There's no doubt about it, I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for Housing 21. That's never been a doubt in my mind, the support and the encouragement. And I think that's what a lot of companies lack, which is why people leave to progress, because there's not that clear road and clear path to progress with the company that they're working within.

**Jill:** I couldn't agree more. It happened within my own organisation, they gave me the opportunity to develop my role and I look forward to seeing that, actually, happen here in Housing 21.

Can you tell me, actually, Steph, a little bit more about the work actually involved in being a Care Worker? Because I see a little bit of it, but not having anybody… not being involved in the care process myself, I'm not sure what the day-to-day work of a care worker actually is, to be quite honest. What would you say, Steph?

**Steph:** It can really vary. Like Jamie said, a lot of people just think of, we're doing personal care, we're showering someone, we're dressing them. There's a lot more to it than that. There’s the…like Jamie said, the emotional support; sometimes you're the only person that they see during the day, sometimes it's the light that they need. You come in, you just have a conversation with them, you just be yourself. It's more emotional support, I find, for a lot of residents than it is the day-to-day of helping them get dressed, take the medication. There's a lot more to it, and I think a lot of people worry about being a carer because of that aspect. They think, “oh, well, I don't want to go in and have to help someone clean themselves up”. And you know what? It's so much more than that and it's so fulfilling to go home on an evening and know that you've made a difference to someone's life that day. Like I say, you could be the only person that that resident sees all day, but you can go home knowing you've made them smile, you've made them laugh.

And it is a warm feeling inside to know that, on a day-to-day basis, you can help somebody, regardless of whether you're helping them with the care. It could be, like recently, I've helped someone realise that they could get help with their finances and it's massively financially better off for them. And going home for me that evening and knowing that that resident is now not stressing, not worrying about bills, really did make me feel warm inside. And I think that's what people need to remember: there's a lot more to being a care worker than the stigma that people feel, ‘it's just personal care’ – it's so much more and it is so fulfilling.

Jill, what qualities do you think are the most important for anyone working as a care worker or even considering working as a care worker?

**Jill:** Empathy, definitely. Understanding that we are all individuals and that each individual may have a similar problem, i.e., say, a stroke. But in actual fact, each person will be different and will actually be different as far as their treatments and their help is needed in that area. It's finding these things out. It's also actually being able to liaise and communicate as you demonstrated, Steph, with the families as well, because that is so important to know what they expect from you as individuals to help, that the residents hear. And friendliness and a smile – that goes a long, long way, and sometimes actually just cheering somebody up who's having a bad day. And also, beginning to get to know the residents that you're working with is so important because you can pick up on things, such as they're quiet – something might be wrong; do I need to sort of say, “are you okay?”. And having that interaction is so so important and it's so much appreciated.

Also bearing in mind that you are, as you stated, Steph, the only person sometimes that people see or know. I, for example, my family live a long way away and should I need a carer, I might…that carer will probably be the only person that I may see, because my family live mostly in the South. And it is so important that the residents form a good understanding of the care that's helping them and that the carer understands actually what they want from that carer and conform… this process of friendship and understanding and a good atmosphere. A good atmosphere, and that is so important.

**Steph:** Yeah, and I suppose that's where the person-centred approach comes in. So, like you said, each resident has got their own needs, everybody's different, and that's where we'd have the person-centred care plans to follow. So you can…any care worker can go into a call, follow the care plan and fully understand what is needed. And obviously, like you say, you adapt to those relationships, you learn little trigger points to know someone's upset. And I think that's a huge thing for carers to be able to pick up on and action if needed.

**Jill:** I've seen that happen here, as you said, Steph, and it is very important and it's appreciated by the residents, and that's speaking on behalf of the residents – that you need to be on top of these things, and if there is a problem, deal with it as promptly as one possibly can.

**Steph:** Absolutely.

**Jill:** Jamie, have you got any comments for me or any questions you want to ask me about residents?

**Jamie:** Actually, I do have a question. Now that we've shared our advice, I want to bring it back to why our care workers are really important and really matter. It would be really good if you could share from your own experience what impact care workers have had on yours or even your friends lives at your court.

**Jill:** Well, yes, I think I mentioned one part actually, of actually being able to help somebody who is going through an emotional problem. Also, I do know that actually there have been people, as Steph has mentioned, and I know one person who did need financial help and that was forthcoming. I know also there's somebody who was not aware actually of what they could get or claim in grants and help and had been, sort of, you know, going on doing their own thing, and they were helped in that particular way to actually deal with that.

And also, the other thing I've noticed is that unfortunately we have lost some members…some residents and since I've been living here, but to see the way that they have been looked after and helped and their families have been helped to cope with that loss, it's very, very important. And I know from the things they said to me that it is, you know, something they've valued and have cherished the fact that people understand what they're going through. And it is very important that staff are always on top of these things, and I think that they will be even more so in the future with this Care Academy.

**Jamie:** Ah thanks, Jill. That's really reassuring to hear actually. I think that going back to the emotional support, I guess as well, our Care Workers also provide a degree of companionship. Going from what you said earlier, sometimes they will be the only person our residents will see, so being that companionship and being able to offer that comfort is just another part of the care worker role, so it really shows how important that role is. But I also want to pick up about our managers and leaders. We know that our managers and leaders make a huge difference to the quality of care that people receive. So actually, the academy will help us to create more brilliant leaders who provide brilliant services to residents, and that's something that I'm just so excited about.

**Jill:** Could you just explain a little bit more how you're going to identify the people, actually, which can progress to these new roles?

**Jamie:** Yeah, absolutely. So for employees in entry-level roles at the moment, they will be able to put themselves forward and nominate themselves, or their line manager can nominate the person to take part. The person has to have been here for at least six months and pass their probation. They will be put forward and there will be a small assessment centre at the beginning, and the reason that we're doing that is we need to make sure that the person has all the right skills that will support them during the academy. So functional skills such as reading and writing, we need to make sure that that's there. If it isn't there, we can make sure we can provide some support to them because we don't want that to be a barrier. But equally, we have to make sure the person coming on to the academy is able to fully participate and take part.

I should also add that throughout the two years, there are interim check-ins with the person to make sure that they know how to apply what they've learned. So it's very easy when you're in a classroom environment and you're learning theory about how to do a particular role. We want to make sure that throughout the programme, throughout the academy, people have truly learned what they need to learn and are able to apply competently and confidently. It's also really good because it gives people a chance to try that role and not have the commitment of having to stick to it if they don't like it, they've always got their real job back at their scheme to go back to should they wish to. But we hope that not to be the case and that once people are the academy, that they absolutely want to take forward their management career with us.

**Jill:** I couldn't agree more, actually, what you said, Jamie, and bearing in mind that the generation that I'm part of, we're all getting older and we're living longer – I hope. So therefore, there will be more organisations which would need to go into this field and more help will be needed and more care workers will be needed. And to professionalise that and to show that we… actually be with the NHS actually as another arm of professional people is very important.

**Jamie:** It is. In my mind, there's no difference between a Care Worker and a Nurse. And although of course they both have different skill sets: one is clinical, one isn't, the responsibility is equally the same. And we want people to view our care workforce equal to that of nurses because it's just as important. We've always known that, but we want everyone else to know that too.

I should also probably add as well, something that we decided we would do is at the end of the two-year academy there will be a graduation ceremony. So we wanted to make it exciting, we wanted to recognise that people have graduated the Extra Care Academy and really really celebrate the achievements of the people that will undergo that two-year programme.

**Jill:** Well, I've never been involved in a podcast before, but I think actually I'd be interested in doing something again because I've learnt so much from sitting down with both of you today about your role. And it's interesting actually to put a background to both of you. Steph, obviously I know fairly well at the moment and I hope to get to know better, and I hope actually that our listeners have enjoyed this episode and particularly hope that they'll be really, really interested in what we're doing about the Extra Care Academy. Thank you.

**Steph:** Yeah, thanks for having us, Jill. It's been great to talk to you also.

**Jamie:** Thanks so much, Jill. Have a lovely time.

And thank you to all of our listeners for tuning in. We'll be publishing a brand-new episode every month, so make sure you subscribe to our podcast channel so that you're notified as soon as our next episode is live. If you are a Housing 21 resident who has been inspired by today's conversation and are interested in getting more involved, then why not join our resident engagement groups? You can find out more about these and more on the resident Information section of the Housing 21 website and we will also include the link in the episode's show notes. Thanks again for tuning in.