

Cameron ([00:00](#)):

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Peter ([00:21](#)):

Hello. I'm Peter Gee. Did you know that one in six Tasmanians are a carer? A carer provides unpaid support to a family member, friend, or neighbor with disability, mental ill health, chronic or life-limiting illness, or who are frail or aged, or have alcohol or drug dependence. As you'll hear, their stories can be challenging and heartbreaking, but also inspiring and heartwarming. This one in six podcast is presented by Care2Serve. Part of the Carers Tasmania Group. Care2Serve is the Tasmanian provider of Carer Gateway, an Australian government program offering free services and support for family and friend carers.

Cameron ([01:09](#)):

Hello, my name is Cameron McLaughlin. I'm 49 years old, and I care for my father Colin in Hobart.

Peter ([01:18](#)):

Cameron, great to meet you and have a chat today. You're not in Hobart though. What brings you to the north of the state?

Cameron ([01:26](#)):

Oh, that's a very interesting question. I live in West Moonah normally with my father, whom I care for. I'm currently in Northern Tasmania in order to look after a friend's property while she's away.

Peter ([01:39](#)):

And it's not just a land area. There's a bit of a menagerie out there. I can see pecking around at the door.

Cameron ([01:45](#)):

Yes, they're the girls. She, there's a little cotchery of six chickens and three muscovies that roam the property by day. And there's also a number of feral cats that are in a cattery, two of which have escaped at the moment, and another two house cats plus three geese and two more ducks in the orchard. So it is quite a menagerie. I believe it's 26 animals, all rescues or recovered animals from places or people that can no longer look after them.

Peter ([02:17](#)):

So does your day job, if we want to put it that way, of caring for your father, help you look after animals?

Cameron ([02:25](#)):

No, no. I think it's a different thing. I mean, yeah. Well, my father is yes, an animal, technically speaking, but...

Peter ([02:32](#)):

As we all are, I suppose.

Cameron ([02:34](#)):

Yeah, for sure. But the care for him is entirely different to looking after animals that are completely dependent on human existence essentially, which is what all of these ones are. And so I have a lot of sympathy for animals, but I have more sympathy for the care of humans, to be honest.

Peter ([02:53](#)):

The question is, what's your father doing while you are up here for what, a month?

Cameron ([02:58](#)):

His usual, which it's paid pension day today. So I've already checked his bank balance, which I'm allowed to do via the power of attorney that I have. He is at the pub having a drink and a gamble basically, which he will do until his money runs out, and then he'll be a little bit less friendly for the remainder of the fortnight. Let's just say. Amicable is a better word.

Peter ([03:25](#)):

Right. Okay.

Cameron ([03:26](#)):

That's his usual thing.

Peter ([03:28](#)):

He's just turned 80, is that correct?

Cameron ([03:31](#)):

Yes, as of last Tuesday, I believe. Yeah.

Peter ([03:35](#)):

So take us back to when you were a child.

Cameron ([03:40](#)):

Yeah.

Peter ([03:40](#)):

Well, Yeah.

Cameron ([03:41](#)):

Okay.

Peter ([03:42](#)):

Your relationship with your father?

Cameron ([03:45](#)):

Limited. He was absent very early on, and I think maybe, but that was because he got into alcohol well before we were born, and throughout our whole early childhood, plus early teens.

Peter (04:01):

You and...?

Cameron (04:02):

My little brother Richard, and my older brother, Grant. Richard and I were very close as kids. There was only a year between us. We were both full blood children to him and my mother, whereas my older brother, Grant is a half-brother, and he was the son of another man. And my father felt like very much that he was doing the right thing by marrying her, which is, I guess reasonable for the generation of when he was 30 or so. But as far as my relationship with him, I don't have very many distinct memories. And the ones that I do, are generally tempered by them being quite negative.

(04:45):

For instance, playing soccer and my father yelling at me from the sidelines while drunk to get the ball and all of that sort of stuff. I don't believe I learned anything valuable from him. I didn't learn any self-control, I didn't learn any sort of moral lessons. He didn't give me really either myself or my younger brother any real instruction about how to be in life, which I think is something that the father figure should be able to give in a relationship to his children, but certainly wasn't able to.

Peter (05:22):

Because of alcohol?

Cameron (05:23):

I think so, yeah. He was consumed by it for, well, my whole life, essentially. Yeah.

Peter (05:29):

So was he, well, present but not present for your adolescence as well?

Cameron (05:34):

Well, he used to drive us to and from places, but he wasn't there for adolescents. No. Him and my mother broke up between my ages of 12 to 14 is as far as I remember. We were left in the house being looked after by him. Mum didn't want to have anything to... She'd dropped the whole lot and walked away.

Peter (05:55):

Let him have custody?

Cameron (05:57):

Yeah, he had custody, essentially. Yeah. Well, there wasn't any formal arrangement, but she left us with him to look after. I thought about it recently, and I think the reason that she did it might have been to encourage him to realise that he had more important things to worry about than his own selfish or addictive desires, essentially. But it didn't work. And so I think we were there for a time, a couple of months. We were still attending Riverside High School at the time, but we were stealing money out of

his wallet to buy lunch for ourselves, morning tea and afternoon tea at the canteen. If we were hungry at night, because he wasn't home, he was at the pub. We would make our way down to the Riverside Motor Inn where he would bleary-eyed, welcome us and buy us a raspberry and counter meal for dinner.

[\(06:47\)](#):

Yes. So that didn't last very long. My mother obviously kept tabs on what was going on, and she came and rescued us one day and took us away. And we lived with her for the remainder of her life, essentially up in Arthur Street in Launceston, in a rental for about 10 years. And she banned us essentially from having anything to do with our father. She had no time for him. She'd been through the ringer. I think, emotional ringer. My father's quite a manipulative ussey old man. Oh. Ussey man, I should say. Well, he's old technically, but not in that. You know what I mean?

[\(07:37\)](#):

The dramatic thing that happened to me as a youth after we broke up, or my mother and my father broke up and she looked after us, was I developed a chemically induced schizophrenia at age 18. I was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. I was full on auditory visual hallucinations. I had a persecution complex at one stage, God complex at another stage, crippling anxiety, suicidal depression, all of that sort of stuff. I was a terrible brother to my little brother as well. I was never physically violent. I don't have been in throughout my whole life, but I was emotionally aggressive and I used to break things of importance to mum. I really pushed her and tested her and caused her a hell of a lot of stress. But she chose to look after me, which is her saving grace and my saving grace.

[\(08:38\)](#):

A few of the fellows that I went to college with were marijuana users, and I fell into it fairly quickly. I'd started smoking at 16 as well. I was peer pressured, I believe. But it was also, I naturally accepted it, got an addicted personality and fell right into it. It doesn't take much to tip me into an addictive kind of behavior, whether it's smoking or marijuana at the time, I never developed a pension for alcohol. I think because of my father primarily. There's a mental block in my mind that just prevents me from ever going there. So TAFE happened, and then going back to what sort of led me to schizophrenia was the psychiatrist at the time did believe it was chemically induced by marijuana, which I accept and acknowledge, but I also believe I had a lot of emotional trauma as a child. I lost my grandfather at about 12 to 14. I can't remember exactly, but he had a brain tumor and it killed him relatively quickly, and he forgot who I was. And I used to idolise him quite a lot.

Peter [\(09:51\)](#):

This is your father's father?

Cameron [\(09:52\)](#):

No, my mother's father. Charlie Goss. And I never got on particularly well with nan, with Gene, but Charlie, for whatever reason, I really liked him as a child. And his passing was really, really difficult for me. It was the first death I'd ever experienced, and I didn't know how to deal with it, and I didn't have the structure at home to show me the coping mechanisms. And I think that was the beginning of my unraveling, essentially.

Peter [\(10:27\)](#):

Medication helped you get on top of that. Are you on top of it now?

Cameron ([10:30](#)):

Yeah. Well and truly. Yeah. I think I...

Peter ([10:33](#)):

What? 30 years on?

Cameron ([10:35](#)):

Yeah. I attribute my recovery to three things. You've got to get the right treating per health professional, whatever level it may be like from a counselor, social worker, psychologist, a psychiatrist. You've got to accept and acknowledge that you've got a condition and you've got to accept the medication that they prescribe for you to take regardless of how it makes you feel.

Peter ([10:59](#)):

A fractured childhood, grief within the family, and then mental health issues. 30 years later, your father is back in your life.

Cameron ([11:12](#)):

Yes.

Peter ([11:12](#)):

How did that happen?

Cameron ([11:15](#)):

Well, to be honest, I got a phone call from one of the bar staff at a local Moonah hotel telling me that my father needed a bit of TLC and I should come down and check him out. So I used to stay... I stayed... Both my brother and I weren't able to have contact with my father until I successfully won an argument with my mother to allow me to. And that was simply, he's half of who I am genetically. I'd like to know at least that much about my history as such. And she eventually caved and gave us permission. And so we started intermittent contact over the intervening years. But that resulted in keynote tickets and lottery tickets for our birthdays and Christmases and things like that, and the occasional phone call.

([12:06](#)):

And then I would intermittently visit him in Hobart because I'd still always had a desire to know who he was and try... Part of what I've learned in the four years I've been there as his carer is that I've diluted myself again to a degree that I wanted a familiar relationship with my father for the, well, final opportunity of his life and mine in those terms. But I've come to realise that it was a complete lie.

Peter ([12:34](#)):

So one of his favorite Barmaids says your dad really needs some help and you decide to look after him.

Cameron ([12:41](#)):

Well, I came down on the bus to have a look, see what was going on. I think it'd been a while since I visited, but he's a hoarder as well. He's in a two bedroom social welfare house, but it was disgusting and full of junk, dog poo in the living room, red backs in the couch, crap carpet tiles, piles of carpet tiles, boxes of videos that he was going to switch to DVDs for a friend of his and just paperwork. He got into

family history, the McLaughlin family history are now transportation and all that sort of stuff. And he had oodles. Just piles and piles and piles of crap in the house.

(13:20):

And when I got there, he was in his bed and his bed was probably his mother's bed that he inherited or took from her house when she passed away. And his two brothers and him sold the house, and it had hole in it, like a full on 18 inch, 12 inch hole, which he was sleeping in. It was the most sad and disgusting thing I'd ever seen in both ways. So I had very strong mixed feelings about it. And we had the conversation about helping him out. I was living in a rental in Invermay, and I broke my lease because we'd made a decision that he did need support, and he'd agreed to that and I decided, "Well, look. I can't not."

Peter (14:05):

Out of loyalty, even though he'd done nothing in terms of being a father to you.

Cameron (14:11):

That's true. Yes. But as I said a little while ago, I always thought that I had the belief that I would be able to develop a relationship with him and learn things about my family that I didn't know. Sadly, that hasn't been the case. And it's only been in probably the last six months that I've realistically let go of those expectations because I care and I wanted to know so desperately and have the relationship so desperately with my father because there's so much background that I didn't get. Mum was wonderful. She saved my life as much as my psychiatrist did, but unfortunately she passed early. So it's a bit attached to that in a way.

Peter (14:59):

So what did he feel about you moving in with him for his own good? Did he see that, "I need this"?

Cameron (15:10):

I think so, yes. He had moments of clarity. It was certainly something that we discussed, but all of that is tempered. He was always drunk anyway. And so I think he was kind of relying on... I've become, to him, over the last four years an excuse, a justification and a reason to continue to drink and to not engage with life by and large. And in part I'm facilitating his continued existence and he has an expectation of me to continue to do that for him. Yeah, that's his...

Peter (15:55):

What form does your caring take? Did he cook for himself?

Cameron (16:01):

I used to cook for him. Most of it initially was health related and cleaning up his house and getting that in order. So he used to run radiant heaters throughout his household. He'd get ridiculously high hydro bills, all that sort of stuff. He couldn't cook. He did cook, but it was always terrible quality food or low quality food, essentially. When I moved in, or just before I moved in, I think I threw out six or seven ute loads from the house. So we got the furniture organised. The dog had dug a hole in the couch, the one with the red backs. All of that sort of stuff. So it was all a bit, yeah, it was a bit crazy. But he...

Peter (16:46):

Accepted that?

Cameron ([16:47](#)):

No, he resented it, actually, is what I've discovered. He resented it and he thinks that I threw out important information, which he tried to get him to engage with the process. "Dad, you're a hoarder." Didn't like that for a start, which most people don't, which I understand. But I'd even tried softly. "There are things we need to go through. You can participate with me in the process and choose what to keep and what to throw out, or I can just go through it." And we tried that several times. It was a good couple of months to get the house organised and he just would be periodically interested and then not at all. And so I ended up doing it because it needed to be done. I guess it was all against his nesting sort of mentality, I guess in a sense. And it was all against that, what I was doing.

Peter ([17:42](#)):

Did you enable him to access services that he would not even been aware that were there for him?

Cameron ([17:50](#)):

Yep. We got him assessed relatively quickly for a healthcare package. He had a care package for his mother because he cared for his mother when she got old, and he was familiar with the services provided by the district nurses. So I looked into all of that sort of stuff and we realised that yes, he could get a care package of a certain amount of money to pay for services. He also had terrible teeth and needed a lot of dentistry, so we got him referred to the public dentist. That was a good six-month process. Eventually they removed all of his teeth and the broken jagged pieces that was still in his mouth and got him a great set of dentures, all of that sort of stuff, all of that with concession or relatively free.

([18:31](#)):

We got his hearing done, we got his glasses updated, and we got him into the programs that would, every two years he gets his eyes checked. And then we also got his physical health... He has had the same GP for 25 years, and so the GP is very familiar with his conditions and proclivities. And so I started engaging with the GP as well with dad's health. I mean, he knew he was a diabetic. He was a type two diabetic. He also had moderate cirrhosis of the liver, plus his general health and wellbeing was just, yeah. He was very run down.

Peter ([19:15](#)):

How long do you think he would've survived in that condition if you hadn't of...?

Cameron ([19:19](#)):

Not long. Six months maybe, if that. I honestly think he would've died. When I got there, he was in his bed, as I mentioned, and he was like curled up in a little ball, and he was all skinny and emaciated and gray. Gray looking in the skin color. He was quite sick. So we got him to the GP and everything else, and he was on a medication regime to treat everything under the sun. He was on about 20 pills a day for quite some time.

Peter ([19:51](#)):

Did you oversee the administering of those medications?

Cameron ([19:57](#)):

Initially, yes. I did that for him. But eventually we realised that he could get a Webster pack created by the chemist, paid for by the district nurse's care package that we eventually got. So he had an assessment by an OT and the district nurse's team, plus the government. The government sends out a person that does a few tests to check on their mental and physical acuity and state and physical health and all of that sort of stuff. But he was assessed at being eligible for a level three care package, which meant that when it was approved, he would be eligible for about \$35,000 worth of funding for services from a service provider of his choice.

[\(20:44\)](#):

And we didn't have to wait, thankfully, very long. But in that interim time, I was going everywhere with him, doing everything for him as best I could. Trying to cook food that he would like while at the same time trying to cook food that I would like. The thing is we have vastly different tastes. Once he'd lost all of his teeth, he lost the ability to masticate anything relatively solid. So that limited his food options. Again, he doesn't eat anything green. He won't drink water.

Peter [\(21:16\)](#):

Where does he think he'll get his moisture from?

Cameron [\(21:18\)](#):

From the beer.

[\(21:27\)](#):

I got to a point, at I think about the two and a half year point, where I was just so stressed. I wasn't coping at all. And I actually contacted the Carer Gateway and had counseling sessions talking to them about my difficulties with my father and all that sort of stuff. And ultimately it was helpful in some regards, but it was also... The weird thing... I find something really difficult about looking after somebody with an aged person. Being a carer for an elderly person is when they start to, I guess, slip mentally and emotionally in combination with the alcohol consumption, there are times where it's very, very difficult, especially when you are living directly with the person you are caring for as well.

[\(22:18\)](#):

So the counseling came around at that time, and when I was, was just very, very angry because I was dealing with the fact that I didn't have the familial relationship that I wanted, that my father's behaviors, including the drinking and the gambling were unchangeable. And then I also ended up experiencing... In a lot of ways, I don't think my father sees me as his son. It's kind of like I'm a person...

Peter [\(22:48\)](#):

Does he see you as his carer?

Cameron [\(22:50\)](#):

Yeah, I think so. More so than his actual child, because I don't think he knows necessarily how to have a relationship of that type with a child or with a grown man now. But basically, yeah. He sees me as a bit of an interruption and an inconvenience when I hassle him about money or things like that.

Peter [\(23:13\)](#):

So any sense of gratitude that you've pulled him out of the mire, that he wouldn't be here anymore if you hadn't arrived back on the scene?

Cameron ([23:21](#)):

Not particularly, no. No. And that's one of the most galling things about the whole situation. I feel quite often resented for what I've done. Not that act specifically of saving his life, turning him around, all of that sort of stuff. But every little thing that I've done along the way to try and encourage and help him to continue to survive and survive well is a little wound, if you will, upon him. No. He doesn't respect me either. And it's very frustrating.

([24:06](#)):

The interactions that my father and I have currently are very sparse and intermittent. I normally occupy the living room on my personal computer. Dad's in his room watching his game shows. He comes out to the fridge to get a beer or make his breakfast. Some days he won't even acknowledge my existence. Won't even say hello, good morning. He can't say goodnight. He can't say I love you either. They're terrible things. It's really quite fascinating in some ways. I love you is the problem one, but the fact that he can't say goodnight, he's never said it. And the entire four years I've been here, I like goodnight dad. And he goes, he just wanders off. I can't talk to him about realistically anything without asking him to mute the TV or deliberately asking him to have a seat on the couch so that we can talk about something.

Peter ([24:59](#)):

And make eye contact.

Cameron ([25:01](#)):

Yeah, exactly. And even then, it's all tempered with my father's expectation that something negative or bad is going to happen. And that's not. I'm not aggressive to him or not angry with him or to him or about him, but it's very difficult to communicate with somebody who just... He's written himself off, I think. He's let go. He's said a couple of times in the recent times is that he's just ticking off the days. And he also does have a terminal liver diagnosis as well, which only emerged last Christmas. So he's been given three to nine months to live. So he's very much in the middle of that clock ticking down. He's got liver cancer, which is inoperable and untreatable because of his general physical health and wellbeing.

([25:53](#)):

We have a goals of care plan on the fridge, which is a non-res resuscitation. He wants to die at home. He doesn't want to go, doesn't want to be taken to hospital to die there. He doesn't want to go into a home because it's the most nightmare-ish thing he can think of. And I agree with him on that front. He doesn't want to go, and I'm not going to force him and I'm going to support him until he passes. It's going to be nightmare-ish. It already is and horrible. But it is part of the process.

Peter ([26:20](#)):

When the inevitable happens, what's it mean for you because you're living in his house right now?

Cameron ([26:26](#)):

Well, it's a rental for a start, and I've been told by the real estate agent because of their current policy of no under occupancy, that I will be kicked out in two weeks to a month. So what it means for me is potentially homelessness along with the emotional heartache of losing somebody that I couldn't help.

Peter ([26:47](#)):

If you find yourself out of a home, what do you do?

Cameron ([26:53](#)):

I don't know at this point. I think I'm going to be couch-surfing with possibly near relatives, his side of the family in Hobart. I'll probably leave Tasmania because there's nothing to keep me here. I have no kids. I have no partnership at the moment.

Peter ([27:11](#)):

Do you see that as a fresh start? And this is the start of the beginning of the rest of my life?

Cameron ([27:16](#)):

Yeah, look, potentially, but I need to retrain ultimately, because I don't know what to do. I'm really not sure. Remember back in high school when they asked you, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Peter ([27:28](#)):

We all probably know that, and some of us already knew, but...?

Cameron ([27:32](#)):

I've never known, and I'm still getting asked the question to this day, and I still ask the question of myself, and I still don't have an answer.

Peter ([27:40](#)):

Well, that means the world's your oyster, doesn't it?

Cameron ([27:43](#)):

In some sense.

Peter ([27:44](#)):

Cameron, what do you think?

Cameron ([27:45](#)):

In some sense, maybe intellectually or in emotionally, maybe, but not physically, no, because of you've got to have means, and I don't have any means other than the DSP, and that's a, that's limited means. I don't know. My future is a little bit grim, I guess, by all accounts. I'm reserving my judgment and what I actually do about it until it eventuates.

Peter ([28:15](#)):

Have you thought with your experiences with your father that you might be able to do this for a living or counsel other carers? Has that entered into your...? Or are you burned out with caring?

Cameron ([28:28](#)):

Well, I am burned out to a degree at the moment, but once I'm liberated, essentially, from the circumstances I'm currently within. I've been in pressured and repressed environments before for long periods of time, and once they've ended, for whatever reason, I've quit a job or people have moved on or left my life, whatever. The energy renews and I get reinvigorated relatively quickly. So I've got that,

yes, potentially. It could happen, but there's something that's been suggested to me by a friend of mine who lives in Melbourne, and that is, I can't remember the exact term, but it's a type of advocacy. An experiential advocate, something along those lines.

Peter ([29:14](#)):

Yeah, that's a really good description.

Cameron ([29:16](#)):

Yeah.

Peter ([29:17](#)):

And you've had a few experiences along the road...

Cameron ([29:20](#)):

I think so, yeah.

Peter ([29:21](#)):

...in your 49 years.

Cameron ([29:22](#)):

Yes. Yeah.

Peter ([29:24](#)):

Cameron, thanks so much for telling us your story today.

Cameron ([29:27](#)):

It's my pleasure, Peter. Thank you very much for your time as well. It's appreciated.

Peter ([29:31](#)):

That was Cameron from Under the summit of Mount Arthur in northern Tasmania. Thanks for telling us your story.

([29:43](#)):

If you care for a family member or friend, Carer Gateway can help. Carer Gateway can support you to navigate the maze of supports, connect with other carers, talk to someone confidentially, get help with your caring role, support with your goals, and residential or emergency respite, all for free. Call 1-800-422-737 and press one. Or go to carergateway.gov.au. Carer Gateway is open Monday to Friday, 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. If you've enjoyed this podcast, share it on your social media channels or tell a friend who could benefit from it and enjoy listening to it. I'm Peter Gee. Thanks for listening.