

VOLUNTEERING

How you can make a difference

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In 2007 volunteering is a way of life for many. What drives a person to offer up their skills and time varies widely, but the spirit of volunteerism is inspired by the idea of mutual help and co-operation that is the heart of our society. Anyone and everyone can volunteer and an amazing amount of time is devoted to a wide variety of causes – with equally massive achievements. The roles for volunteers after all, mirror the times in which they exist, and their roles expand and diversify accordingly.

The impact of volunteerism can be seen throughout society. With a growing awareness of the impact of chronic poverty, prolonged illnesses and disabilities, as well as the crises that result from natural disasters and economic events beyond our control, people have recognised that none of us is self-sufficient all of the time. The voluntary effort of ordinary citizens, often working through their religious or cultural institutions, has led to the creation of health and welfare agencies that provide much needed assistance. Where would we be as a society without the volunteer organisations we are so dependent upon?

Volunteering appeals to people across the spectrum of ages, from the very young onwards. An early start in volunteering can teach young people that the world is not perfect and they recognise volunteering can make a difference in their own lives as well as others, and that great pleasure lies in sharing their intellectual and material gifts. The shared awareness of the challenges faced by different generations often inspires them to further action.

Adults have the ability to contribute their skills and experience in a vast range of volunteer roles. You may wish to volunteer on a program that you are passionate about or come together in a collective to make a difference in your community. The type of role and the commitment involved in a volunteer position can also differ. Some roles involve volunteering for a day or a few hours, in a one off donation of time. Others are a longer term commitment. Certainly, these types of roles are often filled by people who are no longer in the workforce full time but who want to use their skills to make a difference.

This gift of donated time without the thought of payment is one which allows many organisations to continue to function. Think of cancer organisations, some of which see volunteers, perhaps themselves cancer survivors, enhancing their services; their participation ranging from driving clients to treatment facilities, or lending a sympathetic ear

over the telephone. Religious organisations appreciate the pastoral type of visitor who will either telephone or visit sick parishioners. There is also the immense talent involved in raising the astounding amounts of money required to help with AIDS prevention in Africa and other countries.

The list of organisations requiring assistance is a long one however, it is incorrect to think that the volunteer role is a one sided relationship. Many organisations now view their volunteers as an integral part of their structure and acknowledge that services would not be delivered without this important form of support. As such, more organisations are providing professional development sessions for volunteers, covering the full spectrum of standards and practices associated with effective management of resources. This ensures that volunteer positions are fulfilling for both parties and that all parties continue to develop.

Whether you are a group of co-workers, civic organisation, social club, sorority, fraternity, or an individual wishing to volunteer there are many ways you can make a difference in your community. Many people do a stint for a good cause now and then, but for some volunteering has become a way of living and instead of giving their money to change the world, they give their time. This is essential in a time where we realize that everybody's time is valuable and limited.

If only we could celebrate the accomplishments of the countless number of people who make a difference everyday in the same way the media glorifies the actions of celebrities. Our world is different thanks to the actions of hundreds of thousands of volunteers who have each made a small, but significant, difference. It is their actions and accomplishments that we should rejoice in.

This quote by Martin Luther King Jr. says it all “Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace; a soul generated by love”.

For information about volunteer opportunities please contact Volunteering Australia on 03 9820 4100 or search for a role on <http://www.govolunteer.com.au/>

Elizabeth Tapping is Laura Jakob's grandmother and mentor. The value of volunteering has been passed through the generations of their family and both women have volunteered in various capacities, and have managed, large volunteer programs.