

Step Forward & Volunteer!

Ann Wheatley, PEI People First

This fact sheet is for people with intellectual disabilities who want to volunteer. In 2005, Barb Fanning, Kelly Robinson, and Ann Wheatley from PEI People First travelled around Prince Edward Island to talk with women and men with intellectual disabilities who were volunteering in their communities. From one end of the province to the other, we found volunteers who were involved in a wide variety of organizations, doing many different things – from looking after cats and dogs at an animal shelter to helping out at the fire department. They had a great deal to say about what they liked about volunteering. They said it helped them to learn new skills, gain self-confidence, and participate in the community. They were proud of their work and eager to share their stories and ideas about volunteering and encourage other men and women with intellectual disabilities to volunteer.

Have You Ever Thought About Volunteering?

There are many good reasons to become a volunteer. Volunteering gives you a chance to:

- learn new things,
- meet new people,
- feel a part of the community,
- feel good about yourself,
- have fun,
- gain confidence, and
- speak up for what you believe in.

“Volunteering is a good thing because it keeps your spirits up and in contact with people that you want to talk to – it keeps you connected.”

~ Gerry¹

“I volunteered at a senior’s residence and later I got a job there – it was really cool! So sometimes volunteering can lead to a job!” ~ Jane

“I learned how to speak up better and talk in front of people. It gets me out. I learn different things. I meet all new friends at these places.” ~ Marie

Volunteers make a difference in their communities by:

- letting people know what it is like to live with a challenge,
- sharing lots of good ideas,
- helping organizations to make better decisions,
- teaching others about diversity, and
- helping people with everyday tasks from serving lunch to answering the phone.

“I’m happy to volunteer. It means you’re helping somebody out that needs your help.” ~ Marie

Volunteers are everywhere. Once you decide to volunteer, there are many places to choose from, such as:

- senior’s homes,
- schools,
- animal shelters,
- soup kitchens,
- hockey rinks and baseball diamonds,
- fire halls,
- libraries,
- churches, and
- boards of directors and committees.

¹ In this fact sheet, we do not use anyone’s real name. This is to protect the privacy of the people who told us their stories.

Volunteers choose to do many different things.

They:

- care for animals,
- make decisions,
- serve food,
- help senior citizens,
- act in plays,
- sing,
- help at church,
- help the sports team,
- meet with politicians,
- run a canteen,
- make presentations and speeches,
- get involved with issues you believe in, and
- help as leaders in youth groups.

“People need to believe in themselves...Before I started volunteering, a lot of times people told me I couldn’t do this and I couldn’t do that and it took a long time for me to get that out of my system and to believe I can do it. And I know I can do it – I’ve been doing it for 3 years!” ~ Susanne

Getting Started

Here is some advice from the experts – people who volunteer – about how to get the most from your volunteer experience

- Be patient.
- Be nice to people.
- Give it your all!
- Believe in yourself.
- Know what sort of things you want to do.
- Leave your problems at home.
- If you fail, try again.
- Be on time.
- Go out to many places to see what you can do.
- Give it your best shot and listen to what the people are saying.
- Be clear that your time is important – stand up for yourself!

“And if you think about it, go and check it out. Because thinking is not going to help others; you’ve got to put words into action.” ~ Mark

“My advice is, know what you’re getting yourself into, know what you’re going to do and how to work around your schedule. It’s a busy job. It’s hard work. Doing volunteer work is not getting paid for it.” ~ Andrew

Stories about volunteering:

Kelsey is 28: *I’m volunteering in a High School library. Yesterday we pulled some books for some students, and we put a lot of them away. And we stamped and bar-coded some. I’ve learned a couple new things. I had no idea what to do with a photocopier before I started. And I learned how to count the money from the photocopier. I can do it – I can separate everything really fast now and I’m usually right. I learned the first year how to use the computer. I think it’s good to try your hardest at what you’re supposed to do.*

Joseph is 44: *I’ve volunteered with the fire department for 25 years. If there is a bad fire and people need air tanks filled, they bring them in and we work as quick as possible and put them back in the truck and then when they come back, we have to clean the hoses and wash the truck, and make sure there’s water and gas in the truck. When a day care comes in I take them on the tour and show them what kind of stuff that we do...We all know each other and we all trust each other and if I was sick or ill, they’d come here, no problem. I like the atmosphere and how everyone treats me – it’s very relaxing and very rewarding.*

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ISBN 1-55401-276-6

Imagine Canada’s Knowledge Development Centre is funded through the Community Participation Directorate of the Department of Canadian Heritage as part of the Canada Volunteerism Initiative. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

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