



# Once upon a time...

## STORIES ABOUT VOLUNTEERS AND VOLUNTEERING

VOLUME 6



**Volunteer Wellington | Te Puna Tautoko**  
YOUR COMMUNITY CONNECTOR

# Introduction

It's easy to take volunteering for granted. After all in Aotearoa alone there are thousands of not-for-profit organisations powered by a volunteer workforce – we'll just get some volunteers for this role; we need more volunteers; send us some volunteers.

Fair enough. Every single such group works with – and needs – volunteers. But if such phrases roll off our tongues too easily, we need to stop for a moment (several moments actually) and think about the other side of the story.

And that's the purpose of bringing these 31 volunteer profile stories together for Volume 6 of *Once upon a time ... stories about volunteers and volunteering*.

We have here a vibrant collection of people from every walk of life, who have changed and learnt and been happy volunteering with one of **Volunteer Wellington's** 350+ community organisation members.

I have been associated with **Volunteer Wellington** for more than 20 years – first as a paid employee and in later years as a volunteer writer. I have enjoyed my changed status and now feel well qualified to write this introduction for another

volume of stories about volunteers and volunteering. Many of my volunteering assignments have been interviews with these different volunteers, finding out about their experiences.

Without fail, I have come away from a meet-up amazed, impressed – and re-ignited at again being a witness to the power of volunteering in people's lives. And from my objective viewpoint, I applaud the training and professional development **Volunteer Wellington** continues to provide community member organisations, and others, every year.

The sensitive, intelligent management and leadership of volunteer teams is the key to the memorable experiences told in these 31 stories. Congratulations to Regional Manager Julie Thomson and her team, who have never dropped the training ball; despite lockdowns, Covid restrictions and the vagaries of the past uncertain years.

Diversity is what stands out in *Once upon a time ...* The volunteer seekers who come through **Volunteer Wellington's** recruitment and referral process are from every age group, a wide range of ethnicities, different stages of life and career

development. Some are students, some are unemployed, there are those who are retired, others in transition because of illness – both physical and mental – and many who are in paid employment and keen to add a worthwhile interest and balance to their lives. There are new migrants and former refugees connecting with their new communities and the place they now call home through volunteering.

Motives are as varied and all are valid. Managers of volunteers understand this and work creatively with their teams recognising that 'solidarity through volunteering' will result in more integrated and resilient communities. This is the 2022 theme for International Volunteer Day. Hopefully, it is a message that will stay.

Special thanks to the team of volunteer writers and photographers – Felicity Hamill, Linda Hansen, Jo Lucre, Richa Kohli and Pauline Harper. You've brought people's stories to life. Thanks to Sue Hobbs of minimum graphics for designing an inspiring resource that will be referred to for years to come. And thanks to all of you who have told your stories. You have contributed much to our communities through your volunteering and telling your story.

## Pauline Harper

Volunteer writer, December 2022

# Volunteering roles give confidence to new migrant from South India

**Mary Grace Jaison's** first volunteering roles in Wellington were stitching with **Working Bee**, an organisation dedicated to making re-usable bags; and helping out for the day with a Gin Festival – known as **Gindulgence** – held in Frank Kitts Park.

A new migrant from Kerala in South India, with her husband working all day, Mary was alone and feeling 'intimidated and with no courage' when it came to going out into the unfamiliar streets of Wellington.

Her brother encouraged her to volunteer. 'It's the thing to do,' he told her. 'It will help you to know the society – as well as meet people and gain more local communication ability.'

The Gin Festival was a full-scale introduction to her new home. The Kiwi accent was strange and difficult, understanding the protocols of such a festive celebration – and being an Eftpos operator were all part of Mary's 'customer service' day. 'Everything was a first,' she said. 'I was so scared at the beginning. By the end I had gained a lot of confidence.'

Conservation volunteering followed, with another surprise. From among the volunteers Mary met, one was to become a 'best friend'. With these experiences giving her some newfound bravery Mary was ready to come for an interview with **Volunteer Wellington** in order to find a longer term position.

'Would you like to take on a role with this office,' she was asked. 'Of course, was my reply.' To be in an office



*I was so scared at the beginning. By the end I had gained a lot of confidence.*

environment and, in turn, interviewing other volunteer seekers, was perfect for Mary, who graduated with an MBA from the university of Kochi before leaving India.

For two years (at the time of this conversation) she had been interviewing people from many ethnic backgrounds and with equally as varied skill bases. 'I have matched professionals working with government ministries to volunteer positions. Their reasons are to balance their lives and have added happiness; and there are others who find communication difficult but want to be useful – and learn more.' The not-

for-profit retail stores were wonderful, open-minded employers for volunteers with such difficulties, she said.

And like her earlier, first few weeks in Wellington, when she suffered from 'sitting depressed at home', Mary understands how 'getting out and being with new faces changes everything'.

She will continue applying for full-time employment, her aim for the future. But now with confidence and belief in herself. The fear and trepidation of the past have long gone – thanks to volunteering, she said. ■

STORY BY PAULINE HARPER

# Inspiring Youth Volunteers

**Teana MacDonald** – Development Coordinator Volunteer Services Wellington City Mission – is on a mission to see more representation and participation of youth in the volunteer sector in Aotearoa. And it's a mission that's working.

Meeting for the first time in a café on a grey and windy Wellington day, Teana lights up the room when she enters, and as we talk about her work at **Wellington City Mission**, it's impossible not to be happily swept along with her enthusiasm, sincerity and passion for her work.

Drawn to the idea of working in the community, after completing high school, Wellingtonian Teana participated in a Social Justice Gap Year Volunteer programme through the New Zealand Church Missionary Society. The programme combined voluntary work with learning and serving others in a supported environment: 'We travelled around NZ, to Fiji and Cambodia,' she recalls. 'During the course, I had a moment early on that really spoke to me; hearing Wellington City Missioner Murray Edridge share a Greg Boyle quote: "There is no them and us, there is only us", referring to anyone in need'. Teana pauses to reflect; 'I think we all need to look after each other, and I knew then this was an organisation I wanted to be involved with.'

Teana went on to join the **Wellington City Mission** team as a youth intern. 'When I came into the volunteer sector professionally, I was only 18 and I started thinking ... where are all the young people? If we're not handing this down to the next generation, then what is the sustainability of our organisation?' She remembers, 'I felt a strong



*It's an opportunity for young people to grow their skills...*

responsibility to help make youth engagement a priority. Let's take these youth who are passionate and bridge them into it.'

In 2020 Teana worked on a successful pilot Youth Volunteer programme based on education and volunteering focused on passing down the **Wellington City Mission** model of work. 'We've had participants from the programme return and step into leadership roles running their own team of volunteers,' she shares. 'It's an opportunity for young people to grow their skills and lead ... it's always great to see them so excited.'

It's a busy time for the organisation with a new larger building currently under construction, with plans to be completed by 2023. 'It's called Whakamaru – to shelter and protect,' Teana explains. 'At the new site I will be part of the team coordinating

around 1000 volunteers!' she grins. 'It's incredible. We couldn't do what we do without our amazing helpers ... not just the work they do, but the unique skills, gifts, energy and passion they bring to their roles.'

It's clear the **Wellington City Mission** values align with her own. 'I see what they do and think it's the type of work we all could be more involved with ... mobilizing people to care for those in need in the community. It's rewarding to be a part of something bigger than yourself.'

Interview over, we are swept back into the Wellington wind and as we giggle our way through a quick photoshoot and wave goodbye; I feel all the better for knowing there are young passionate changemakers like Teana in our world. ■

STORY AND PHOTO BY FELICITY HAMILL



# Confidence gained through volunteering with Salvation Army

Volunteering has brought new patterns and new networks into **Regan McHugh's** weekly timetable.

Regan is an organised young man who has been long-time client and worker with Earthlink in the Hutt Valley (Earthlink is an organisation committed to recycling and environmental care which supports people who have employment challenges.)

I met Regan as he was beginning his volunteering work for the day at the Salvation Army shop in Petone. He had already vacuumed the floor and soon it would be time for the truck to arrive and he would be loading the heavy boxes stacked in the storeroom.

'I love it here,' he said. 'Especially loading the trucks.'

When the possibility of volunteering cropped up, Regan made an appointment with **Volunteer Hutt** for an interview with manager Kim Jansen.

**Volunteer Hutt** runs a supportive programme with Work and Income where clients develop personal goals for volunteer work and are then matched with suitable roles. After Kim spent time with Regan she knew the Salvation Army presented a perfect fit for him.

Kim has worked closely with the team at the **Salvation Army Store** in Petone, recognising their ability to be inclusive and creative in the way they find interesting roles for everyone keen to volunteer.



*I love it here ...*

Regan said he was 'a bit nervous at first' but the friendliness of the office and 'nice people' won him over. His current role at the **Salvation Army** has added to his balanced, active daily life programme. And it gives him energy, he said.

In fact, Regan has gained so much confidence through talking to customers and being part of the **Salvation Army** team, that he spoke publicly at **Volunteer Hutt's** International

Volunteer Day celebration at the Dowse Art Museum last December.

Any notes? I asked. 'Oh no,' was his quick reply. 'I could remember everything I wanted to say.'

The truck was due to arrive any moment. Time for me to sign off. With his winning grin Regan began his next task; picking up boxes and boxes of books ready for a morning of loading the truck. ■

STORY BY PAULINE HARPER

# Student volunteer values new skills

**Alyssa Patel**'s been volunteering in the Te Omanga Hospice shop in Lower Hutt one afternoon after school for around six months. She found the position by examining openings on the SEEK Volunteer website which led her straight to **Volunteer Hutt**. Alyssa wanted a retail opportunity to gain shop experience and be with age groups different from her own. Her involvement also contributes towards her Duke of Edinburgh Award. The Award acknowledges that young people benefit from experiences outside the classroom. It's not a competition against others but encourages young individuals and recognises their achievements.

Alyssa appreciates the support from **Volunteer Hutt** that helped her towards a job interview and her eventual appointment. Comprehensive training in the shop gave her confidence to "work the till" and manage both cash and card transactions, but she still takes great care to get all the numbers right.

Thorough on-the-job training means Alyssa works in almost all areas of the shop. She likes that when her friends call in, they find the environment interesting and encourages them to donate their unwanted items and support Te Omanga Hospice. The organisation provides reassuring care to those living in the Hutt Valley with a terminal or life limiting illness. Along with specialist medical staff, Te Omanga Hospice relies on trained volunteers and Alyssa is happy to be one.

She urges students everywhere to check with their local Volunteer Centre for opportunities in areas that interest



*I enjoy spending time with a variety of different age groups ...*

them. From Animals to Environment, Art to Recreation, they'll find something to build up their skill levels. And she's confident about the value to a future employer of volunteering service on a CV.

At the Te Omanga Hospice shop, Alyssa enjoys direct customer contact best but also helps manage donations, which are never examined until the donor has left. Her manager does some pricing but Alyssa wields the pricing gun on standard items like books. Other rewarding backroom work is the cleaning of dusty paintings that may have hung on walls for years before being brought in.

As a Generation Z user of entertainment streaming services, Alyssa was surprised to discover how many people like to hold their favourite movie or music in their hands as a DVD and CD. Luckily, donations of these are plentiful. Other novelties are the extensive collections of small items called bric-a-brac, not a term she'd used before. With her colleagues, she knows to turn items over to check manufacturing details and not confuse a valuable piece with an inexpensive keepsake.

She's never regretted her decision to volunteer and has already persuaded one friend to do the same. ■

STORY AND PHOTO BY LINDA HANSEN

# Understanding the varied needs of WI clients

**Peggy Bhana-Thomson** (left) is manager, field officer and a committee member of **Diabetes Wellington Inc**, a support organisation for people living with diabetes. During more than 20 years of involvement Peggy, a type 2 diabetic herself, has talked to and provided educative workshops and forums and supported thousands of people likewise afflicted.

In order to maintain her 'very necessary' volunteer workforce, some years ago **Diabetes Wellington** joined **Volunteer Wellington** and from then on 'all sorts of wonderful people have been coming my way'.

According to **Volunteer Wellington's** Engagement in the community manager, Tracy Ward, Peggy has an amazing ability to build rapport and really understand the varied needs of the Work and Income clients she works with and regularly refers to **Diabetes Wellington**.

'I love people,' says Peggy, as she talks enthusiastically about her methods for guiding and training a diverse volunteer team ... who, she explains, add so much capacity to this small, but far-reaching specialist organisation.

Her knowledge of diabetes and so many of the associated issues – depression, anxiety, often panic attacks, occasional physical disabilities – has given her a sense of the origins for people's lack of confidence and fear of the future when in transition and/or unemployed.

'I know their aim is to find paid



*Being part of a collegial team.*

employment and move on; and when this happens we celebrate,' she says. But during the volunteering experience much change takes place in the course of such worthwhile work. Following directions, learning from mistakes ('I never mind how many times I have to explain things'), developing telephone and reception skills, being part of a collegial team ... these are the ingredients that shift self-esteem.

Tracy has first-hand evidence through the in-depth follow-up she carries out with all Work and Income clients engaged in volunteering. 'As people grow in confidence their chances of

finding paid employment improve hugely.' Their demeanour, and even their posture, according to Peggy, becomes more positive. With better CVs the next step is easier.

And if there is a rejection their role at **Diabetes Wellington** is still open – plus a supportive team ready to give encouragement. There's no time for being too disheartened as the next set of tasks is always waiting for action. Again manager Peggy offers more light on her workplace. It's busy but there is never a need to panic. Just ask if you find a problem, she says, there's always a solution. This is a happy place. ■



# A strong wairua supporting volunteers

2017 is a year **Taylor Curd** will never forget. A serious head injury changed his life in an instant, and despite huge challenges he returned to work as a volunteer just one year later.

For Taylor (Ngāti Awa), the accident resulted in having to re-learn things many of us take for granted: 'It affected my vision, communication and thought processing,' he recalls. Recovery is still an ongoing process, but progress is good; and Taylor has recently joined the **Volunteer Wellington** team. 'Everyone's story is different, but I am currently volunteering as a slow integration back into the workforce,' he says. 'Volunteering is something I've always done, but my most recent work interviewing volunteers is enhancing my cognitive skills with more screen and discussion time.'

A degree in Sociology and Education has meant Taylor's skills naturally lend themselves to roles in social justice and wellbeing. 'It's been really interesting working across a vast range of ages and race,' he reflects. 'I've worked on programmes in the past combining elderly and high school students looking at ways to lessen loneliness in our elders; worked with politicians on speech editing, and am now enjoying recruiting volunteers.'

Recruiting volunteers is an essential service of **Volunteer Wellington**, and Taylor joins the team helping volunteers to choose a field that might suit them. 'We help guide them through the ins and outs of volunteering, ensuring they are comfortable in their role and not taking on too much.'

An important part of the recruiting process is also connecting with Work and Income clients, some of whom are



*To be included in an environment where your voice matters ... can be pivotal.*

looking to volunteer for the first time. 'Some clients come to us after struggling for a long time which is something I can relate to,' Taylor explains. 'For some it's been a long time since they felt valued; it's been a long time since they have heard the word yes ... how do you pull something positive out of that? Volunteering. To be included in an environment where your voice matters and you are an important part of a team can be pivotal,' he reflects. 'It also gives you references and skills ... two essential steps in the pathway to employment.'

When asked for any favourite aspects of volunteering, Taylor is quick to reply. 'Networking. I love meeting so many different social groups from all walks of life,' he says. 'You get to learn so much from others and in turn it adds a richness

and depth to my own experience of life. It surprises me that not more people volunteer.'

Taylor is currently receiving rehabilitation support through rongoā Māori (Maori healing) and reflects on the similarities in volunteering. 'It's all about our taha wairua (spiritual wellbeing.) If we help each other, that spirit of mahi tahi (working together) gets handed down from generation to generation, the support is there.'

Any advice for newbies considering volunteering? Taylor smiles. 'I think the best advice I could give is the advice I was given by an older gentleman when I first started; he told me to just enjoy myself ... you won't know if you enjoy it unless you try it, so just give it go.' ■

STORY AND PHOTO BY FELICITY HAMILL



# Pathway to a fulfilling career

When **Tamsin Matthews** first started as a volunteer for **New Zealand Red Cross** in 2010, little did she know it would lead to an 11-year career within the humanitarian organisation.

It was during a challenging time in her life that Tamsin found herself on a benefit and needing extra support. Tamsin reflects she was fortunate to be assigned a 'wonderful, caring, open minded case manager' from Work and Income, who helped set up her first volunteer role in a **Red Cross Shop** in Upper Hutt. 'My work as a volunteer allowed me the time and space to build my confidence back up' she says, 'It also helped me to gain the experience and reference I needed to apply for further employment.'

Over time one role led to the next, laying the foundations for her full-time career with the non-profit organisation. During the past 11 years Tamsin has held various management positions running **Red Cross Shops** in Wellington; at one point co-ordinating a team of 90+ volunteers across Kilbirnie and Upper Hutt. For the past 6 years she has managed the Petone **Red Cross Shop**, which is an area of Wellington she has come to love. 'Petone is fantastic, it's very eclectic – a wonderful melting pot of culture and ethnicity.' Tamsin currently heads a team of 15+ volunteers whom she likes to encourage to work where their innate skills lie. 'Some people are keen to work on their customer service or language skills, so I try to place them in people facing roles, while others prefer to work the stock out of the public eye,' she says. 'Everyone has something they can add. I always like to say just give



*Everyone has something they can add.*

it a go and we can figure out what you like.' It's obvious Tamsin is well-liked by her team, and the shop has a fun atmosphere while everyone gets on with their work. 'We like to have a good laugh,' she smiles. 'Just the other day we completed the midday Waiata Challenge; we all stopped what we were doing and sang a song much to the surprise of our customers! We even won some prizes for our efforts!' Coming from a background of volunteering herself, Tamsin understands it can be nerve-wracking starting a new role but encourages her team to do their best. 'There is a sense of family built up over time,' she muses. 'I always say to new team members, what you put in, I will put back into supporting you, whether it's encouraging volunteers

to brave their new language of English or working for a reference to gain further employment. We work as a team.'

Early on in her journey with the **New Zealand Red Cross** Tamsin embarked on her own research into the organisation and quickly realised their values and goals align with her own. As a proud member of the rainbow community, Tamsin embraces the **New Zealand Red Cross'** seven Fundamental Principles: Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality. 'The **New Zealand Red Cross** fundamentally stands for humanity' she smiles, 'and ultimately, what is humanity? It's love.' ■

STORY AND PHOTO BY FELICITY HAMILL

# So many possibilities through volunteering

**Philippa Kenealy** had become unemployed and 'needed to get out of her head'. It's too easy, she said, to think the worst of yourself when the employment odds are against you.

A Work and Income client, Philippa had a helpful case manager who introduced her to the idea of volunteering through **Volunteer Wellington's** Engagement in the Community programme. She also realized she wanted to meet new people, develop different skills – and offer something back to her local community.

Her talk with **Volunteer Wellington** was revealing. So many possibilities. Getting out of her head – and the house – was going to be no problem. **ESOL** 'native New Zealand speaker' conversation partners; and **Vinnies Re Sew**, a project with **St Vincent de Paul's** in Kilbirnie stood out as interesting choices. The **ESOL** role has shown Philippa new aspects of communication. 'It's made me much better at understanding different accents as well as giving me more knowledge of other cultures. And at **Vinnies Re Sew** I'm excited by seeing so much dedicated creativity and ways of restoring and recycling used clothing and materials.'

Philippa's past study and working experience have involved acquiring IT skills. These are appropriate now for her main **Vinnies Re Sew** task which is to sell quality donated fabrics through Trade Me. Funds raised support the **Vinnies Re Sew** mission of restoring clothing which has seemingly 'had its day' into new items of desire!



*I'm developing new skills, learning lots and am part of a team.*

When Philippa talked about her original drive to volunteer she described anxiety and depression with deep feeling and emotion. At the time of this interview, as she showed me around her **Vinnies Re Sew** workplace, there was no doubt about her newfound motivation and cheerfulness as a result of her current involvement. 'When there are too many hours spent at home you can get fixated on negative thoughts – a downhill spiral.'

So much had been happening at **Vinnies Re Sew** during her time there. A fashion show of restored jerseys, skirts and shirts and the pleasure of seeing 'past it' garments transformed into fashion items have been highlights.

An outcome from her developed communication skills via **ESOL** is that she now finds it easier to have conversations with the migrant staff who are regular volunteers at the **St Vincent de Paul** shop situated below the **Vinnies Re Sew** workshop. 'I've enjoyed teaching those interested how to make tiny craft objects – a hobby of mine. I've been commended for my patience!' One staff member even suggested a future career in early childhood teaching.

And as Philippa happily says 'who knows what the future will bring. I'm optimistic now. I'm developing skills, learning lots and am part of a team.' This is all important stuff for getting back into the paid job scene during 2020. ■

# Volunteering leads to a balanced healthy life

**Judith Hatton** was out last night in **Zealandia** counting kiwi calls, when we talked early in 2021. 'Thirteen or 14,' she said. Judith is also a Night Guide Assistant (NGA) helping visitors to spot tuatara and kiwi. Daytime 'Valley Hosting' allows her to chat with visitors to help them to learn more about the sanctuary and to give mini talks on several different subjects – tuatara, kaka, takahe, and weta and the surrounding wetlands are among the possibilities. Some weeks in the summer Judith says she might be in Zealandia 3 or 4 times fulfilling different roles.

Her enthusiasm and love of 'this beautiful place' was rewarded last year when she received a Kaka Award. 'I was chuffed but also a little embarrassed – I'm doing something I love. It is a privilege not a chore!'

Judith has had a long and comprehensive career in teaching, but always planned to volunteer once retired. She knew from the sandwich board outside the **Volunteer Wellington** office in upper Willis Street that that was the place she would go 'to find out what this volunteering is all about'.

In 2013 this was exactly what she did. In the course of her discussion with an interviewer she was clear about what she didn't want; but was nevertheless surprised at the 'amazing variety of roles'. Meeting people, feeling she was doing something worthwhile, and being able to sign off at the end of the day, were her aims.

Her effervescent personality opened the way to interviewing other volunteer seekers at **Volunteer Wellington**



*It is a privilege, not a chore.*

– and giving guided tours at **Old St Paul's**. 'I needed a bit of a push to take on the interview position; but I said yes. Seven years later I'm still thoroughly enjoying all that this entails.'

So many different people, interesting challenges, finding a solution for those who may be in transition or at a loose end; these are examples of the scenarios which come her way every week. Last week it was someone from Egypt hoping for a way to keep mentally active while full-time job searching. This week an Indian man who simply wanted to 'give back' to the society which had welcomed him as a migrant.

Judith continues to keep her hand in in the teaching world through her part-time work with SPELD (Specific Learning

Difficulties) clients. But she emphasises that her varied volunteering roles have added up to a 'truly balanced life style'. Plenty of walking – which she loves – via **Zealandia**; meeting new people through interviewing volunteer seekers with **Volunteer Wellington** – time with friends and always gaining new knowledge because that is the nature of well organized volunteering, she says.

'I love my life,' says this energetic woman approaching her seventh decade. The variety adds up to good health and a delight in the world around her – both physical, intellectual and social.

She knows she is very fortunate to have the ideal life for her. ■

STORY BY PAULINE HARPER



# Experience gained from a challenging volunteer role

**Tobi Trevena** is a cheerful and engaging young man who recently graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce from Victoria University. He studied accounting, management and commercial law; and is now looking to secure paid work relating to his degree, as are so many other former students in this time of post Covid-19 lockdown.

2020 is a tough time to be job hunting says Tobi, but Work and Income's suggestion to be part of **Volunteer Wellington's** Preparation for Employment Programme 'is adding much valuable learning to my days'.

Having been in his weekly volunteering role as a Prevention Support Team Member at **Take 10** for several weeks, Tobi says he has learnt much about active listening, working with aggression and the sort of dialogue needed to de-escalate situations which could lead to potential harm.

**Take 10** was set up as a 'safe space' in central Courtenay Place, opening from 10 pm until 4 am to help people from all walks of life who are vulnerable; and to prevent incidents often caused by excessive alcohol. It is literally a place to take time out ... to **Take 10**.

A mobile unit set up with AstroTurf, games, water and a team of volunteers – like Tobi – it's friendly and accessible to everyone who comes along. Tobi explains more about how he learnt during his training to intervene calmly and pleasantly, to be observant and have the confidence not to be afraid, even in the face of confrontation and possibly eruptive situations.

'Asking the right questions, not taking over and never being judgemental is all



## *Asking the right questions...*

part of it.' These are valued transferrable skills. As a lover of watching sport Tobi is also a night owl – another useful prerequisite for working at **Take 10**.

In fact it's because AstroTurf has such a positive vibe that Tobi has recommended to his friends to come along to **Take 10**; he has even used it himself on a non-volunteering night!

'Just some pleasant space to spend a bit of time, drink some water, think through the next part of an evening – like getting home safely.'

Tobi also has a regular role with **Volunteer Wellington's** administration team, mainly doing follow-up discussions with current and past volunteers. Documenting such findings provides valuable information about the impact of

volunteering for both the individual and the organisation.

All done via email and telephone transactions, this is a very different field of communication from his night-time talks with often voluble party-goers. 'Neither of these forms of conversation is always easy,' he says, 'but I've become much more aware of how to work through something and find a point of engagement.' And the same goes for either a telephone chat or an early morning 'helping out' discussion.

He even uses the tools he had learnt to 'check in' with himself more now in everyday life. This degree of emotional intelligence in one so young will take Tobi Trevena far. The right job included. ■



# Being part of the community through volunteering

**Sheree Thompson** is a youthful-looking grandmother determined to build up her work experience after a series of health issues took their toll on her confidence and motivation.

Her 'rebuild' path began with a course in assertiveness through the **Hutt Valley Women's Centre. Workbridge** further supported Sheree with ideas and positive next steps. And then it was **Volunteer Hutt** with their one-on-one interviewing process who were able to take Sheree to the next level – volunteering.

Sometimes a volunteering role doesn't work out the first time, said Karen Wattereus who organizes **Volunteer Hutt's** Work and Income programme. 'But Sheree has shown remarkable persistence and always returned for another suggestion if she felt her goals were not being met.'

And this is what Sheree had to say about **Habitat for Humanity's** retail store, just around the corner from **Volunteer Hutt's** office, when she decided that this could be the right role for her. 'As soon as I walked in I loved the place. There were so many lovely people around. It was like a breath of fresh air.'

Having had a background in retail, Sheree was keen to work as many shifts as possible; the manager restrained her enthusiasm saying start slowly. Make sure your health is up to it.

Two and sometimes three shifts weekly became part of Sheree's new routine. Travel expenses could have become a barrier but through the Work



LUKA CLAYTON

*As soon as I walked in I loved the place.*

and Income partnership with **Volunteer Hutt**, assistance was available for reimbursements. 'What a difference that makes when you are on a benefit,' said Sheree.

With time she has begun to make good friends among the **Habitat** staff, most of whom are volunteers. 'One young boy of 14 has become a great helper to me – he showed me how to use the till and since we've struck up a really good friendship and he chats to me a lot.'

Only now is Sheree recognizing how important this 'getting out and being involved in the community' is for her.

Through friendships plus 'exercising part of my brain I'd forgotten about a bit' loneliness is being overcome, motivation and confidence are returning. She spoke about the spiral effect of 'being alone' – which so often leads to depression and the undermining of motivation and then further health problems.

Thanks to support such as that given by **Volunteer Hutt** and, of course, the management and team at **Habitat**, Sheree Thompson is achieving her major goal – to be part of the community. From now on she is building up experience and resources which, she hopes, will lead to paid employment in the future. ■

# Being of service with a smile

**Nivanga Numiamalii** has many communication gifts. She knows how to listen with empathy and understanding, she can touch people's hearts to such an extent that their troubles and stories come to the fore and they, in turn, listen to her. But probably her most powerful gift is her smile.

'Once when I was in Pak'nSave I noticed a palagi woman who looked a bit downcast and I smiled at her. We continued shopping and then I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Thank you for your smile," said the woman. "I am dying of cancer and today you have made my day." I cried when I went home – but was happy to have been of service.'

So when Nivanga went to **Volunteer Hutt**'s office after retirement as a teacher aid in Wainuiomata, having been referred via Work and Income to the Preparation for Employment Programme, she enjoyed talking about volunteering with then manager Katie Terris; and looking through the list of roles which could make use of her people skills.

After Wainuiomata she had worked for a few months in an 'ice-pop' shop in Apia, Samoa. In her usual smiling way, this had led to groups of children being drawn to her kind spirit (and not just the ice-pops) sharing stories and beginning to sing together rather than get into trouble on the streets.

Back home in the Hutt – where she has lived since she left Samoa aged 15 – and realising that volunteering was a positive way to build new networks



*I believe there is nothing more rewarding than being involved in people's lives and helping to make their day happy.*

and build the confidence needed to continue the search for full-time paid employment, Nivanga talked through **Volunteer Hutt**'s long list of options. She was drawn to **Thumbs Up**, a Petone organisation dedicated to providing creative activities for people with disabilities.

There was one Samoan boy among the group. His face immediately lit up when he saw Nivanga. He recognised the cultural roots they shared and was always ready to sing, dance – and smile. Then the lockdown happened and everything was on hold.

At the next stage of her volunteering journey Nivanga went to another volunteering organisation, **The Remakery** attached to Eponi School's **Common Unity** project. More experiences, more networks, more smiles. She was impressed with the creative work happening in this hub of growing, making and cooking.

Wherever the future takes Nivanga she will always take her smile. 'I believe there is nothing more rewarding than being involved in people's lives and helping to make their day happy.' ■

## Dancing to a new tune

**Ayesha Ratanpal** needed to take a break from a career in insurance spanning 25 years. Through **Volunteer Porirua** she found an amazing assortment of choices and landed two very different roles. One is supporting women, often long-term unemployed and who want to look confident – and well-dressed – for a job interview through **Dress for Success**; and the other is dancing up a storm 'Bollywood' style at the disability support service, **Whitford Brown Community Trust**.

Ayesha said she chose to volunteer as she was looking for something meaningful. It offered her a chance to give back to the community and make a difference while developing new skills, building on existing ones and meeting new people. Her husband's suggestion to work on her 'life portfolio' was a catalyst for change.

After spending four weeks training to be a stylist, and having worked at **Dress for Success** for more than five months at the time of this interview, Ayesha says the sheer task of going through clothing bags to sort clothes for clients, sale, or to donate, is massive.

'I am learning so much about the quality of clothes, style, and if a piece of clothing is good enough for a client to wear for a job interview.'

Within **Dress for Success** there were various aspects to understand and learn. It has been one step at a time learning each new step process, she says. 'A bit



*I feel it's a chance to spread much-needed aroha around us.*

scary but there's nothing like giving it a shot and trying something new.'

Ayesha's endeavours have certainly not gone unnoticed. She has recently become a board member and secretary for the organisation.

At **Whitford Brown** she is equally appreciated. People wait for her on Fridays with many asking the manager if 'Dance Lady' is coming today. She says seeing their happy faces and enthusiastic energy to dance lights up her face and makes her feel happy too.

Sometimes she finds herself dancing

alone – 'it seems a bit daunting, but I'm okay with it. I feel it's a chance to spread much-needed aroha around us.

'If my specialised skills can bring betterment to society, women, welfare and the community in general – then why not?'

Recently Ayesha started a new six-month contract where management supported her desire to continue her volunteer work. ■

STORY BY JO LUCRE



# Gathering skills for life

**Andrew Marshall** had worked in retail chains since high school. Then, in his mid-20s, those lines of customer after customer began to cause him anxiety and tension. He tried night shifts with a smaller number of people but his equilibrium was out of kilter. The anxiousness persisted.

He recognized that unemployment – when it became longer-term – was ‘a backward step’. Andrew explained these causes of anxiety as we sat in a Lower Hutt café and I heard his story.

When you’re not going anywhere, there’s no growing, no development, no real rhythm to your week ... it starts to become ‘same old same old’ and you don’t quite know what day of the week it is. Then you know you’ve got to do something about it.

A recommendation came through Work and Income to volunteer and when Andrew visited **Volunteer Hutt** and talked with Anita, the breakthrough began. He knew that to get back into the workforce he needed a recent reference; obtaining one became his goal.

Andrew lives in Wainuiomata so a referral to an environmental project called **WAIU**, managed by Gary James, was ideal. Taking off regularly for working stints with a focused team was definitely getting him out of his ‘same old same old’ thinking habits. Tasks involved pruning, cutting back blackberry and weeding around new species, as well as going into the forest to collect seeds and cuttings.

And then there was the ‘trying my best to talk to people and find some common interests’ at the morning tea breaks.

I talked with Gary James about his positive communication with diverse



*No more same old same old!*

volunteer teams. ‘It starts with cups of tea and bikkies. This is the time when we gather around the table, or out in the sun at the picnic tables, and talk. People discuss their different backgrounds and I introduce the aims and vision of our restoration programme.’

Another key to the Work and Income clients ‘hanging in’ is Gary’s introduction to the **WAIU** vision. He has a simple chart/map explaining: here is what it is now, this is what we are doing and why, this will be the result – the end vision. ‘By clearing blackberry and water courses we are allowing native grasses to come through. You are helping to make this happen...’

Almost without realising, Andrew Marshall was beginning to interact with others and come up with some bright ideas of his own. He could prove he was

employable. He was also learning about his surroundings and the complexities of nature. He was gathering skills for life ... and he received a good reference.

Now he is keen for further environmental experience and, at the time of our interview, was about to start a volunteering role with **Hutt City Council’s Petone Beach Project** – again growing native grasses and clearing unwanted colonizing plants.

He has built up a rapport with Anita at **Volunteer Hutt** and calls in around every two weeks for a bit of encouragement or news of a different volunteering position – something which will keep him engaged and motivated as he strides along a pathway to his goal of paid employment. ■

STORY BY PAULINE HARPER



# Always finds a place in the team

**Che Cormack** is the skilled manager of the **Salvation Army Family Store** in Petone. He has the ability to 'find a place in the team' for all the volunteer seekers who come his way. 'I put together a mixture of people with a variety of weaknesses and strengths. The results are high-level functioning partnerships.'

Che's career with the **Salvation Army** began five years ago as a truck-driver in Upper Hutt. As a member of the **Salvation Army**, volunteering had always been part of his life, so when he took over the management of the shop in Petone a couple of years later, building a diverse volunteer team was his main aim.

With none to begin with he 'wore a lot of hats'. He also missed the communal aspect that a group of volunteers gives to a store with a mission of social justice and social action. In fact he admitted that not working with diverse volunteers could be considered as unprofessional within the community sector.

At the time of this interview he had a team of 20 volunteers ... and a continual stream of others who are interested and able to take up the slack when people move on. 'So now I have the time to train new people, set them up with buddies – and also talk with them so that they do feel included and part of an interesting environment.'

Those who make up the Petone team cover every sector of society. There are those new to New Zealand, keen to improve their English speaking skills. 'They will usually move on to paid jobs after six months or so,' said Che. Others may have social anxiety and lack of confidence, retirees want to build routine and interaction into their week, those



*It's a very nice business model.*

in transition may have had an illness or been at home with small children for a while ... all want to be part of something worthwhile; and to develop and learn according to their abilities.

A maxim from Che which illustrates his trusting and inclusive style of volunteer management is to let customers know there is a 25% chance that the person serving them may have trouble giving the correct change. Everyone has been completely happy to accept this, he said. And they cheerfully check their change! Ironically, since bringing in this 'policy', store income increased noticeably.

**Anna Chesterfield** was out the back sorting, pricing and labelling. Che asked her to help out with some photographic technicality required for this profile story. She was happy to talk

about her experiences and how she had 'found' the shop via an interview with Anita who works with Work and Income clients at **Volunteer Hutt**. 'I had been at home with my small children for a few years and didn't feel very confident. This retail volunteering is perfect – such a great and supportive atmosphere. I'm learning so much.' Anna also had high praise for the ongoing support being given by Anita. 'She rings me to see how I'm getting on. I really appreciate this encouragement.'

That's the sort of feel you get at the Petone **Salvation Army Family Store**. Everyone is happy – the volunteers, the donors, the customers. And the more Che gives over responsibility to his team, the more the sales go up. 'It's a very nice business model,' he says. ■

# Cooking up a great CV – and community connections

**Petra-Li Torea** grew up watching her mum and her aunt bake for the family, and knew that she'd found something she'd love to do. 'They're amazing bakers, and did all the family events. I started learning from them.'

After training in food preparation at Weltec, Petra-Li started looking for work, but like many young people, she found it's hard to get a job when you don't have work experience. Making conversation with customers was also challenging.

Work and Income suggested volunteering, and Petra-Li came to **Volunteer Porirua** to see what her options were. Some of the retail roles sounded interesting, but as soon as she heard 'café and community volunteer', Petra-Li knew that was the one.

Josie Olsen runs the Oasis Community Café in Waitangirua, and was very happy to welcome Petra-Li as a new volunteer. 'She's doing really well,' Josie says, 'she's becoming more confident, making more conversation with the people who come to the café. We're working on making sure she knows all the different tasks that need doing, so that she can check what needs doing, and prioritise.'

'We're working on goal-setting for all our volunteers,' Josie adds. 'We want to have goals for the organisation, but also individual goals for each person.'

For Petra-Li, baking for the café is a natural goal. She already enjoys preparing food such as sandwiches (ham is popular!), and making hot drinks, but she really loves to whip up muffins and cakes.



*My family is glad to see me out doing something, moving towards paid work.*

She's also considering tackling the Oasis café's magnificent commercial espresso machine, but admits that it's a bit scary. 'It's easy to get a steam burn, especially with the milk part.' 'You learn the coffee side,' suggests Josie, 'and I'll look after heating the milk!' Petra-Li smiles and agrees.

'My family is glad to see me out doing something, moving towards paid work,' she says. 'And I've got to know more of the people who live around here. I know all the regulars now.' She plans to come to a musical event the café is hosting soon. With the experience and skills she's gaining, and with Josie to provide a reference, Petra-Li's CV is

getting more and more impressive. She is better prepared than ever to find work in a café or bakery.

'Volunteer Porirua has helped the Oasis café so much,' says Josie. 'Petra-Li is coming along great. She's definitely helping us more than we're helping her.' It's good to see the pride in Petra-Li's face as her work is acknowledged and her presence is valued.

If you're in Waitangirua and fancy a coffee, pop in to the Oasis Community Café, at the back of the Waitangirua Mall. You'll find plenty of people to talk to, good coffee, and if you're lucky, some of Petra-Li's baking. ■

# Volunteering achieves transferable skills

**Junior** has been doing piecemeal slices of work for years and has now decided he wants a purposeful career. He has studied mechanics; but to achieve an apprenticeship he needs a good reference.

When his Work and Income case manager told him about their partnership with **Volunteer Wellington** his next stop was the organisation's branch office in Porirua and a talk with Preparation for Employment coordinators, Tracy and Dianne.

Quickly they caught on to Junior's interest in mechanics and his need to gain transferable skills. Together they selected a role with **The Green Bike Trust**, a vibrant group for whom **Volunteer Porirua** has sourced many volunteers over the years. The Trust recycles dumped bikes by piecing together the right bits from other old, dumped bikes. And producing one 'as good as new'.

Situated in the hills near Porirua, the setup is ordered, busy and constructive – an ideal volunteer placement for Junior. When Dianne and I went up to talk with him, he was holding a lonely bike seat with nowhere to go ... at that moment. Junior's mission was to find a fit for the skeleton bike he was working on in the workshop area that day.

'It's a really nice friendly environment,' he said. 'If I ever get stuck supervisor Mike or one of the other volunteers will always help me out. I am learning a lot about how to



*I love it up here ... and I like learning from the others.*

connect pieces of machinery and make something work.'

He manages to re-create around two bikes a day. The more experienced team members will 'pump out about four or five' in that time. Then Mike stepped in (he's been with **Green Bikes** for more than 12 years) saying 'it's not about the numbers. Rather it's about knowing that every little bit helps.'

A grin from Junior and a realization that he really is helping to reduce wastage, make sure everyone in Porirua can own an inexpensive – but very serviceable – bike; and that through this learning experience he is on his way to

his sought after 'good reference' and an apprenticeship.

Having such a regular workstation has also been a motivation for Junior to 'get into fitness'. He talks quietly but a glow of accomplishment comes through about feeling healthier and more involved with local life and a worthwhile cause. 'I love it up here – and I like learning from the others.'

As **The Green Bike Trust** logo states, this pathway to employment is definitely 'a journey worth taking'. ■

STORY BY PAULINE HARPER



# Getting active and moving in the water

**Phillipa Tebby** has been unemployed for two years. She says that many people with whom she has worked and who have been in their late 40s or early 50s have had similar experiences – redundancy. Her CV has gone out to numerous potential employers but only one has resulted in an interview.

‘There is no doubt ageism is out there,’ she says. ‘It’s disheartening as we’ve still got decades of working life ahead of us. Such a lot of experience is being lost when employers insist on hiring younger employees.’

Undaunted, Phillipa, last year, followed up a suggestion from Work and Income (who has a partnership contract with **Volunteer Wellington/Hutt/Porirua**) to get involved in volunteering. **Volunteer Hutt** had plenty of positions on offer and when a role that involved water appeared, that was it for Phillipa.

**Thumbs Up**, an organization working with people with physical and intellectual disabilities, runs regular swim sessions at Naenae and Huia pools and needed a support assistant who would climb into the water with participants.

Phillipa, a keen competitive swimmer in the past, is still enthusiastic and able. ‘I really enjoy this volunteering role and the people are lovely. Our aim is mainly to get everyone active and moving. If someone can swim we’ll encourage that; but there’s plenty of fun and games to be had by just being in the water.’



*We’ve still got decades of working life ahead of us.*

A new network of people combined with a service to the community is ‘absolutely’ an ideal way of preventing isolation, Phillipa says. She loves her garden and is also an ardent reader, but recognizes that people’s worlds can shrink when they’re home alone for too long.

‘We meet at the pool on Thursdays and I’m aware of the dedicated workers in this sphere. I love being in the water and I’m beginning to understand more about building up trust – and rapport – with the **Thumbs Up** group.’

Meanwhile the employment search continues and currently Phillipa is following up on her interest in books (‘working with publishers some years ago was my most favourite job ever’) and applying for library work in Upper Hutt. It was mentioned to her that being involved in the community would be a plus.

**Thumbs up** to Phillipa’s present volunteering work in the water and a possible future with books! ■



# Volunteering changing young lives

**Carlin Fairley** (pictured left) is 19 years old. Her peers may have already picked a path, but what's different for her is that she's aware of her passions. Feeling disillusioned with traditional education, jumping from school to a level-4 course at WelTec, she decided to take a break and explore her options in a hands-on, real-world sense. Torn between child and youth care, and with Work & Income recommending **Volunteer Wellington**, she found a role at the **Karori Youth Centre**.

At least twice a week, Carlin busses out for an hour to Karori from Berhampore – 'I do it for the kids. When they greet me with smiles and hugs, I just know this is what I'm meant to do.' She gleams further, 'They trusted me in my first week itself. A boy came up to me and said, "Can you play Halo?" and I said, "No, but I can try."' And this attitude has defined her volunteering experience.

Being a drop-in centre, Carlin has no idea how many kids will be there. In that unstructured environment, her skills and attributes are being tested and honed. She says, 'People always said I'm relatable and adaptable, but I didn't believe it until I worked here. I've had to find ways to connect with these boys who may not share my interests. We play sports or simply talk and unwind with whatever they're feeling.'

When she realised there weren't a lot of girls at the centre, she showed initiative. 'I love makeup, so I tied it into my passion for youth. The girls were very excited to come in and play with it, and express some of that creative freedom.'

Alex (pictured right), a youth



*I may not be in a classroom, but I'm still in a room full of kids who are teaching me things. They bring me joy and purpose.*

development worker at the centre, spoke of Carlin's achievements: 'I have been very impressed by Carlin's willingness to come alongside our young people and build relationships with them. Whether it's through laughter and banter, or by having meaningful chat, she has risen to the challenge! She's an extraordinary young woman and I can't wait to see where this experience takes her.'

Alex has also introduced Carlin to future study options like Praxis block courses. With first-hand knowledge and a referee, she feels reassured that, 'Volunteering gave me an amazing stepping stone. When I take those steps, I know now I'll be ready.'

Carlin has found that volunteering can help people discover if their passions

and hobbies can become feasible careers or vice-versa, where they can weave their passions into their jobs. She sums up the importance of places like the youth centre with, 'When I was their age, I didn't know such places existed. I may not be in a classroom, but I'm still in a room full of kids who are teaching me things. Like patience. They bring me joy and purpose.'

Thinking ahead, Carlin feels that if there's any job tailor-made for her, it's youth development. Her experience is ultimately emblematic of what volunteering can do for others. It can appeal to any demographic and it can change lives. ■

STORY BY RICHA KOHLI

# Feeling part of the local community

**Arathy Nair** (pictured left) came to Wellington from South India, an accounting graduate and a new bride. She aimed to find work quickly and continue her career in finance and administration.

'I could handle my first few rejections easily,' she said. 'But as the number grew I began to feel disheartened and depressed. Always the response was "you need two to three years of New Zealand experience".'

Catch 22! Her husband had studied in New Zealand so had had no problem finding employment and being absorbed into the local workforce. Arathy was alone all day with no family and few friends. A sociable, vivacious person, loneliness set in.

As she kept exploring possibilities via a government website, the idea of volunteering appeared. Arathy went into **Volunteer Hutt** and took part in an interview. The options which came up surprised her. And she felt that by talking face-to-face with the staff, 'inside knowledge' would help her.

She was right. Manager Katie Terris immediately spotted her as a potential interviewer. This role requires sensitivity, articulacy and a warm personality. Arathy was ideal.

After so many hurdles during her first few weeks in this country (she lives in Petone Lower Hutt) – 'rejections, no one to mentor me or understand my feelings of isolation' – she was beginning a journey towards being more confident and acquiring peace of mind.

'There were some bumps mind you,' she says, now with a grin. 'But the training and mentoring was good – I was



MALCOLM WOOD MBIE

*I am not an outsider ... I have a voice.*

learning a lot and loving my volunteering role so much that I wanted more.'

That's when the community opened up. She began to feel 'really part' of her new home by working with enough volunteering positions to take her out every day of the week.

These included email administrator at **Plunket**, data entry administrator for **Hutt City Council's** archives, reception at Lower Hutt's **CAB** and a stint as area co-ordinator for **Mary Potter Hospice's** annual fundraising event. Promotional roles with **Volunteer Hutt** were added to the mix.

'At first I was intent on receiving work experience. As time went on I found there was great satisfaction and enjoyment from just the doing of

the work. Being acknowledged for my contribution to the community through the **Volunteer Connect Awards for new migrants** also meant a lot to me.'

At the time of this interview Arathy had been in full-time employment for a few months, working in the credit department of Dulux in Gracefield. She keeps in touch with **Volunteer Hutt** and is always on the look-out for volunteering roles she can do from home during the weekend.

She has good friends now, met in the course of her volunteering. 'I am not an outsider – bur rather an involved participant in community life. I have a voice.' ■

# Volunteer seekers all have different needs and aspirations

**Margarita Dimitrievska** from Macedonia, originally Yugoslavia, has a rich cultural background. She speaks seven languages and has studied in her homeland, France and at Victoria University in Wellington. The latter was mainly to learn English when she first came to New Zealand more than 20 years ago.

A teacher in Macedonia, she continued teaching here, both French and support work in local schools. Then she heard about **Volunteer Wellington**. 'I've always liked helping people and communicating at deeper levels. I came for an interview wondering what I could do. I was very surprised when "interviewing" was suggested; could I do this I wondered?'

Margarita's eyes sparkle as she talks about those early weeks. 'I completely fell in love with the role.' Although she had had a long teaching career she had never been involved with the administrative and directing side. This has become part of the position that she loves and enjoys.

'People seeking volunteering work are all so diverse. And all have very different needs and aspirations. Sometimes it is physical disabilities and other times mental health issues or stresses caused by a changing lifestyle often leading to unemployment. Or people are just feeling scared and have no confidence because of isolation and loneliness.'

After five years of volunteering Margarita is able to express her passion for her task clearly. 'I was amazed at how I found myself in such different work from my past experiences. Sometimes I



*I completely fell in love with the role.*

felt like a psychologist encouraging and showing my clients the new places they could go themselves.'

Through this close contact with different people she discovered new parts of her own psyche – as well as new skills and communication strategies. 'This made me very very happy.'

By telling people what she is thinking about their potential and the 'amazing' volunteering possibilities from among **Volunteer Wellington's** many community members, she can see them 'open their eyes'. And without fail, Margarita says that those volunteer seekers who come in looking sad, always leave with a smile.

The roles she finds for people illustrate the diversity which is the

strength of **Volunteer Wellington**.

It could be finding something for an unemployed counsellor new to this country, or gardening, food distribution or retail positions for those with special needs.

As a migrant herself, Margarita loves talking with those who are learning English and coming to terms with being in a very different culture from their own. 'Yes, there are varying views,' she says, 'but overall people are very trustful and approachable here. I have learnt that and I love it. My years with **Volunteer Wellington** have shown me a community that wants to help one other. And trust one another.' ■

STORY BY PAULINE HARPER



# Plant restoration programme provides skills for life

**Gary James** began growing plants in local home nurseries 30 years ago, aiming to restore community spaces with native specimens. By the time the **Karori Sanctuary** (now Zealandia) was established these 'private home nurseries' could be consolidated under a single organisation.

And Gary's career path was likewise established. As a paramedic with **Wellington Free Ambulance**, his day job and convenient four days on and four days off shift work, and his commitment to nature and conservation, he was able to mesh the two together – 'a rewarding way of life,' he says. 'Occupational therapy!'

His programme morphed into **Wellington Native Plant Restoration Project**, set up under the auspices of **Zealandia** and **Forest and Bird**.

Ten years ago Gary handed the management and volunteer leadership of this enterprise to long-time volunteer enthusiast Chris Streatfield. 'But I'm there regularly and marvel at the development over these years.' This year alone more than 11,500 plants – 80 different locally-sourced species – have been distributed to 25 different projects throughout Wellington.'

Since he moved to Wainuiomata, a nearby wetlands region has become Gary's ongoing focus. Called **WAIU**, regular volunteer teams come out weekly and often in weekends as well, to continue pruning, cutting back blackberry and weeding around new species, as well as going into the forest to collect seeds and cuttings.

Hutt and Wainuiomata locals come via **Volunteer Hutt** (many referred through the Work and Income engagement programme) and that's when Gary's skill as an experienced, knowledgeable – and also very likeable



*It starts with cups of tea and bikkies.*

– leader of volunteers comes into play.

'It starts with cups of tea and bikkies.' (The Karori restoration project is famous for Chris's weekly home-baked fruit cake.) 'This is the time when we gather around the table, or out in the sun at the picnic tables, and talk. People discuss their different backgrounds and I introduce the aims and vision of our restoration programme.'

Often people are young, lacking in confidence, unemployed or in transition after an illness – or just don't know what to do with themselves. Gary emphasises that these different cohorts are balanced out by others who have a deep passion and knowledge of conservation. 'Around the table – and with the tea and bikkies – all the groups are meeting and learning from one another.'

He is amazed at how those who have been 'socially isolated' begin to change within a few weeks. 'One young

fellow was very quiet for a long time, but he's now asking questions and has a few bright ideas of his own. There is no doubt that through this regular interaction and working together, people can prove they're employable. Their CVs become more current – they've learnt about their surroundings and the complexities of nature. Some will be ready to lead conservation projects in the future. They have skills for life.'

A key to these volunteers 'hanging on' (besides the tea and bikkies) is Gary's introduction to the **WAIU** vision. He has a simple chart/map explaining: here is what it is now, this is what we are doing and why, this will be the result – the end vision. 'By clearing blackberry and water courses we are allowing native grasses to come through. You are helping to make this happen....' It's a vision that's infectious when there's an inspiring leader. ■

# Right place at the right time

Having studied art in Russia for three years, **Elena Truman** knew that the **New Zealand Police Museum** in Porirua was the perfect place for her to volunteer.

Coming from Ufa, Russia 13 years ago, Elena had experience producing art for her local police station.

With her three children growing older, she says it was time to start her career and when **Volunteer Porirua** suggested a few volunteer options, the **Police Museum** stood out.

'I liked how it sounded,' she says, 'it's a museum, with art stuff.' It was also in a perfect location, close to her home.

With her computer graphic skills Elena designed two detective trails at the museum which were run in the school holidays to entice junior detectives aged 5 to 7.

'I like working with kids, they are so excited,' she says. 'The people are so amazing and the museum environment is so interesting to me.'

Working next to Porirua's neighbouring Police College proved fortuitous for Elena as she heard of a paid position at their main reception.

Elena applied for the job and was successful, embarking on six weeks of job training, preparing her to greet



*When Volunteer Porirua suggested a few volunteer options, the Police Museum stood out.*

customers, provide information about the Police College, manage security access and help police recruits get inducted.

She says there are lots of systems to learn but the people there are all relaxed and helpful, particularly her trainer.

'My trainer is very helpful and understanding,' she says.

She hopes to do more hours as time goes by but is enjoying working again.

Elena is grateful to **Volunteer Porirua** for all their support which has led to her achieving her goal of starting a new career.

'My kids are very proud of me,' she says. ■

STORY AND PHOTO BY JO LUCRE

# Career pathway gets underway through volunteering

**Jenny Pavitt's** admin job of 23 years was dis-established in 2020. Several months followed with no sense of structure, no socialisation, no direction. 'I missed the routine and the people I worked with – and above all being involved in something beyond myself.'

Ex-work colleagues were very supportive and it was suggested volunteering was a great way to go during times of transition. In fact, Jenny's confidence was at such a low ebb that plucking up the courage to ring for an appointment at **Volunteer Porirua**, her nearest branch office, 'took some nerve'.

'I knew I had to apply myself and no one could do this except me.'

Then when she did it wasn't so bad after all! Dianne (manager of the Porirua office) was lovely. 'Together we worked out four possible volunteering opportunities. Then she gave me time to think about it.' Step one was completed. Now she needed to make a second appointment and be interviewed for one of the 'opportunities'.

However Dianne, being aware of the hazards of entering a new experience when people have lost their sense of purpose and motivation, intervened and offered further support. She was with Jenny for her initial discussion with Trish Lee, Volunteer co-ordinator for the volunteer team at **Kenepuru Hospital**.

Jenny, in her late 50s and a self-described 'gentle soul', said she felt much trepidation about this 'interview': What to wear? What to say? Will I project myself enough? She chose sensible, tidy trousers and a bright red jersey – 'a vibrant colour to give me a bit more confidence.'

Because 'everyone was so lovely' all went well. Jenny joined the **Meet and**



*The orderlies and volunteer co-ordinator, Trish, are so supportive...*

**Greet** team and has now worked there for the past seven months ... at the time of this interview. She talked warmly about the excellent training and how all the other volunteers, plus administration, orderlies and medical staff, have been 'amazingly' encouraging. The hospital is like a family unit, she said.

Wearing a uniform helps too. No more wondering-what-to-wear issues – always to the forefront for those who have been unemployed for any length of time. And even being continually masked due to Covid19 protocols, has had a plus. 'I need to speak louder when I greet people and be a bit more assertive – a good lesson for me. I've learnt so much about the different wards and the hospital customs and culture. And the feedback about me has been so positive.'

Jenny knows she is making a

difference to many people's hospital experience – whether it be as a patient or a visitor. This has given her a sense of fulfilment about her volunteering work – as well as purpose for each week.

Having to meet people whose emotions are changeable and, at times, even volatile has given Jenny new-found confidence and adroit communication ability. But even the occasional difficult customer doesn't fluster her! 'The orderlies and Trish are so supportive that I never feel anxious or ruffled.' An administrative role with tricky communication required, could be next on Jenny's career agenda. She feels she has come a long way since her days of 'being at home having to pluck up the courage to make a phone call.' ■



# Welcome to the whare, girlfriend!

**Jo Ann Rerekura (Te Ati Haunui-a-Pāpāurangi)** is a spirited soul and a hard-working mother and grandmother. She is one of eight, hails from Whanganui, and is at present volunteering through **Volunteer Wellington** at the **New Zealand Red Cross Shop** on Jackson Street.

She had prior work experience in driving large travel vehicles up and down the country, but after the occurrence of a near-fatal health incident back in 2018, Jo Ann made the better decision to hang up keys. She moved to Wellington to settle where she'd be closer to her daughter and whānau.

Through **Volunteer Wellington's** partnership with Work and Income, Jo Ann heard about volunteering but wasn't sure where she would fit or how to go about it. Thankfully, after a talk with Kim, Manager of **Volunteer Hutt**, a position with the **New Zealand Red Cross** store in Petone sparked her interest. The organisation is a charity, and is one with which Jo Ann is familiar as her parents had been frequent donors to the organisation during her younger years. The available weekly position at the store turned out to certainly be a coincidental, lucky match for her. Not only does the humanitarian organisation itself centre around the values and morals that are most important to her, but it is also the people in the store she considers to be her team that make a



*When the community gives something to you, you give back.*

huge difference to her experience. She praised Tamsin, the store's manager, for being so welcoming on her first arrival. She recalled a moment from her first day, saying she opened her arms out for her and told her sweetly, 'Welcome to the whare, girlfriend!'. Right away, Jo Ann knew this would work perfectly for her.

She also wanted to talk about what she had learnt – labelling, sorting, sizing, deciding. 'I love settling down with a big pile of clothing ... and by midday it's sorted.' A far cry from driving up and

down the country – but of great value both to the community and for volunteer, Jo Ann. When asked what it was that drives her the most in attending to the store every week for a shift, she said that it is the simple fact of giving back that holds great importance to her. Jo Ann expressed wholeheartedly that 'when the community gives something to you, you give back', and that is why she has continued her service to the **New Zealand Red Cross** since the month of August of last year. ■

# 'Collecting' mission follows security work career

**Graham Nelson** has been involved with security and bodyguard work for more than 40 years. He has worked with big bands, embassies and entertainment venues in New Zealand and several countries around the world.

With martial arts as his base and an ability to smile and communicate with anyone, when unemployment hit, Graham was determined to remain cheerful and engaged with people. 'After all life is a journey – not a destination,' he grins. Even if he didn't have paid work he wanted to keep meeting people and being useful.

So he headed for **Volunteer Hutt** and was impressed with the friendly welcome he received from manager Katie and interviewer Anita. Through their Work and Income programme they talk in depth with clients to find the most appropriate and meaningful roles.

**Foodbank** was Graham's volunteering starting point. 'The food people brought in would put a supermarket to shame,' he said. And the team spirit among the volunteers was strong. He loved that. 'We were all getting to help others and enjoying doing it together.'

Then his 'collecting' mission began with, at the time of this interview, every weekend booked for the entire month.

The **Child Cancer Foundation** was last weekend, next week it's the **SPCA**, then **Blind Low Vision NZ** and finally **NZ Red Cross**. He will be on a course for dealing with emergencies with **NZ Red Cross** as an extra. What could be better than having a former security guard around in an emergency, the organisation had said.



YUNA CHOI

*Volunteering ... keeps the mind sharp. Keeps the communication skills alive.*

Heading for 60, age has been a barrier in the paid work field; whereas voluntary organisations understand the value of experience and knowledge gained during a dedicated working life. And as Graham reiterated it's the meeting of new people that he likes. 'Keeps the mind sharp. Keeps the communication skills alive.'

As he does his standing-with-his-collection-box stints among the varied roving crowds there could be a politician, a sporting elite, an entertainer who will recognise Graham with a smile of recognition, recalling that this was the friendly man whose job was to keep them safe.

Or it could be a patched gang

member who will also recognise that here is a 'strong man' – and that he is standing where he is to collect funds for the community. 'Yes they gave a donation to the **Child Cancer Foundation** and we exchanged greetings and hongi,' said Graham. His cheerfulness has a far reach...

Having spent so much of his life in so many parts of the world, often exposed to huge crowds and vastly diverse populations, Graham knows it's important now 'to get out of the house'. He needs to be part of life and the community. That's what's keeping up his spirits and giving him the motivation and confidence to stay in the paid job seeking circuit. ■

# A treasure among the treasures in Upper Hutt

**Diana Soulsby** could be described as an eccentric character with her purple coloured hair, hearty laugh and exuberant personality. She has certainly injected a lot of life and passion into her role as a volunteer at **Te Omanga Hospice** shop, Upper Hutt.

Diana was referred by Work and Income to **Volunteer Hutt** who provide a supportive service matching clients with volunteer roles. 'I went to **Volunteer Hutt** and they spoke about my going to volunteer at **Te Omanga Hospice** shop in Upper Hutt'. Diana had heard nothing but rave reviews about the voluntary experience in this shop so she didn't hesitate to grab the chance.

After meeting the manager of the shop Ant, who Diana describes as 'an amazing man and boss', the deal was sealed. Diana immediately slotted in well with the staff although it took them a brief time to get used to her mauve mane, piercings and tattoos. In this capacity Diana is helping to challenge the stigma around appearance and look for the person underneath. With great communication skills she can converse with diverse communities.

Diana has bipolar disorder and severe anxiety. With bipolar you're either up or down, unless you take medication to even out the moods. In the past she has alienated herself from others and is no stranger to isolation having been through a 'hell of a lot' in her life. She says 'getting out as a volunteer in the community helps me feel better about myself'. Nowadays she also knows that downtime is essential for recharging.



*Getting out as a volunteer in the community helps me feel better about myself.*

She finds relaxation escaping into reading and loves nothing more than watching Netflix with Smooch, her dog.

Diana uses her skills mostly in the shop front. From customer service through to mannequin dressing – she enjoys it all. Diana loves being out the front talking with customers and other staff. The manager, Ant, accommodates all the volunteers' skills whether they prefer being out the back sorting or pricing items or counter work. There's something that suits everyone.

Diana is a very empathetic people person, often helping others. One of the highlights of the job is taking on young volunteers to train. All the staff enjoy

seeing the 'young ones come out of their shells'. Her voluntary work has helped build confidence, motivation and a feeling of contribution and connection to her community. She also describes it as being good for your mental health and feeling of self-worth.

Diana can't speak highly enough of **Volunteer Hutt**, describing them as really lovely people who have provided great support and understood exactly what she needed. And with Diana volunteering at **Te Omanga Hospice** shop, Upper Hutt has its own living treasure. ■

STORY BY JEANNA THOMSON



# A time to mend and find resilience

There is a quiet strength in **Mike**, who had been roofing for 20 years, and after a serious shoulder injury, he went on a benefit. Exasperated by injuries throughout his career, coupled with the wear and tear of ageing, Mike retired from roofing. He hasn't been gainfully employed since 2017. At a well-being seminar at Work and Income, Mike found out about **Volunteer Wellington**.

Although he initially wrestled with the idea of volunteering, he felt that the longer he was on the benefit, the more he wanted a job. Mike realised he needed references and a CV — things he's never had to think about before. 'I'm a hands-on fast learner but people my age, who have been out of job for a while, we're in a rut. I want to ease my way back into working.'

He discussed with **Volunteer Wellington** his background in roofing and love for animals, and together they picked two organisations, the Curtain Bank at the **Sustainability Trust** and **Cats Protection League**. He volunteers once a week at both places; at the Trust, he assesses and measures curtains to see if they're ready to go out to the wider community in need. The shelter provides a safe haven and veterinary care for cats needing homes.

On a personal front, Mike perseveres, in the face of depression and a fear of being judged. Volunteering has been a healthy experience for him. He explains, 'it gets me out of my own head and my house, and I get to talk to different people which I hadn't done in a while. Everyone I work with is a woman, which is a big change from the roofing business. I trust all of them.'

Lynley, Coordinator of **Curtain**



*I say go and volunteer and something might happen. To have Volunteer Wellington is incredible.*

**Bank**, is greatly appreciative of Mike's understanding of measurement and his practical experience. She is impressed by Mike's commitment. 'He turns up every single time, and I can depend on him. It's very hard to find consistency in people. We have a team of 25 volunteers and Mike's fitted in very well, very easily.'

Mike's manager at **Cats Protection League**, Iona, also praised his good nature. 'While Mike certainly does his fair share of cleaning, he also brings an innate love of animals and a real desire to see cats receive the best care possible. Everything Mike puts in, he gets back from the cats!'

Mike finds making all of these connections very valuable. Within three months of volunteering, he has a drive to do more. 'I am feeling more confident to

explore and find the right fit, a role that could turn into a part-time paid position.'

Before volunteering, Mike felt he was simply another person on a benefit, trying to manage his injuries and mental health. As a result he took a step back from helping people, something which he knows is ingrained in him. Now he tells everyone how unreal volunteering is. 'I say go and volunteer and something might happen. To have **Volunteer Wellington** is incredible.'

Mike has a flair for figures and problem-solving, but is averse to strenuous heavy-lifting. As he tries to make the best of his options, volunteering imparted the resolution he needed. 'I'm slowly and surely coming back to myself,' he concludes. ■

STORY AND PHOTO BY RICHA KOHLI

# A dream comes true through volunteering

**Mamta Pundir** is comfortable being confronted with any aspect of administration and database updating and clean-ups. From North India and now living with her husband and two young children in Upper Hutt, she reckoned on her Masters of Business Administration being enough to acquire employment when she started the search.

'Instead, I got rejection letter after rejection letter. I needed to show some examples of New Zealand experience on my CV. But how? It was a depressing time.'

When a friend recommended volunteering, Mamta's 'breakthrough' became possible. She had a face-to-face interview with Kim Jansen, manager of **Volunteer Hutt**. And as they talked through the placement possibilities, **Big Brothers Big Sisters** caught her imagination.

'When I was young, I had always had in my heart that I wanted to connect in some way with kids. This voluntary role was a dream come true.'

The organization runs a mentoring programme for children between six and 12 years of age, said Mamta, where they can 'soak' the mentoring process and move into adolescence with more confidence, self-esteem and sense of their own potential.

Manager, Ashleigh Stallard (pictured left) 'does a fantastic job training mentors and ensuring good matches take place.' As a one-person operation she depends on voluntary support to keep administrative needs up-to-date. She quickly spotted Mamta's skills and ability to 'take action' – as well as a heartfelt interest in the organisation's cause.



*When I was young, I had always had in my heart that I wanted to connect in some way with kids. This voluntary role was a dream come true.*

**Big Brothers Big Sisters** was the perfect placement for Mamta, who took on responsibility for database updating and administrative needs which cropped up – especially in the changeable Covid19 environment – all the time. For such a vibrant organization with a number of Hutt Valley and Wellington outposts, a strong, cheerful base is a necessity – but often difficult to find because of limited resources and the flexible skills required.

Straightaway the work appealed to Mamta. Besides using and further developing her skills base, she has had insights into the lives of 'real' New Zealanders. 'Through the children, parents and mentors I meet, I am seeing so many different sides of life. I'm so glad I'm helping a little bit.'

With her days of despondency well gone she can now look objectively at volunteering and the impact it has had on her life. Settling well into local life, using her skills and education well – alongside achieving new knowledge, meeting people from all walks of life, feeling part of things. 'It has really helped me.'

And to put everything into a 'journey to employment' perspective, shortly before this interview with Mamta, Ashleigh offered her paid employment working 12 hours weekly with **Big Brothers and Big Sisters** – as their permanent administrator. Many dreams have come true for Mamta Pundir. ■

# Discovers career pathway through volunteering

**Misty Yates** has acquired an impressive list of achievements since she began, several months ago, her volunteering work at the **Upper Hutt Red Cross Shop**. For starters, she now likes talking to people. 'I was really shy before I can to work here – an introvert I think. Never talked to strangers.'

Manager Teresa Crowhurst says, 'Misty's good. She watches and learns. She's a people person and very suited to the variable work required in a retail outlet.'

Misty's background has had a few setbacks with family issues and illness keeping her from considering any sort of career path. She became a Work and Income beneficiary with no idea of what direction to take. When her case manager suggested talking with **Volunteer Hutt** about finding a volunteer placement, she was aware she knew nothing about her local region – or that volunteering was 'real work' but with the freedom to learn and gain experience.

'Kim (manager of **Volunteer Hutt**) recommended this shop. She said the people who worked here were really nice and very friendly. That helped me to choose. The staff team gave me freedom to find an area I liked and gradually I began to do all sorts of tasks. I liked the feeling of responsibility – and that I was doing something useful.'

Misty listened to how people answered the telephone – with a



*Now I have direction. I know the area I want to work in.*

friendly, matter-of-fact greeting. She watched how they smiled and talked to customers. She began to get a sense of the value of different goods and how to price accordingly. And the cash register was no problem once she had observed the process a couple of times.

'Now I have direction. I know the area I want to work in.' This is customer service, a call centre maybe or a retail shop. She was ready to begin a course the week after I talked with her. 'I will miss the **Red Cross Shop** as this is the place where I have learnt so much – and

also met such friendly people.'

Her family have noticed the changes too. They are surprised at Misty's 'amazing personal development', the way she now talks confidently to strangers – and the way she likes being busy. It's a happier work and neighbourhood scene all around.

And top of the list, she is grateful that her creative case manager at Work and Income suggested that first visit to **Volunteer Hutt**. There is no doubt this has been a life-changing experience. ■

STORY BY PAULINE HARPER