

Connect, share, explore and learn – Volunteer.

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When my position as a writer at a fashion information website was made redundant at the start of the year, it came as a huge shock. Having been in employment for over 20 years, and having been assured by bosses just three weeks previously that despite the economic downturn, “no cuts are planned at this time” - I didn't see it coming at all. As the initial shock subsided and the stark reality sank in, I determined not to let anger and bitterness take hold – being old enough to understand that this business decision was everything to do with cutting costs, and nothing to do with my ability or track record. At the time, I happened to be reading Janet Street Porter's wonderful little book, “Life's too f\*\*\*ing short”, and her take on redundancy is simple, “Just use it as an opportunity to try something different... It wasn't personal - you have to repeat and repeat that to yourself over and over again”. So, armed with that advice, I embarked on a new freelance writing career with lots of energy and enthusiasm. However, as the grip of the recession tightened - two months and not very much work later, I realised I needed to explore other avenues. On one of my daily trawls of the internet, I stumbled across Wandsworth Council's volunteering section. Volunteering was something that I had often thought about when I was employed, but something that I had put off to do, “When I have more time”. Now there was no excuse; I signed up.

My first volunteering experience was as a review writer for Wandsworth Council's Arts Festival. I was soon venturing out across the length and breadth of the borough. From lovely posh Putney to the earthy diversity of Tooting, my forays took me on bus routes, tube and train journeys in search of local culture. Up until this point, I had lived in south west London for 25 years, but in the two weeks I spent on this project, I became really aware of my surroundings in the wider local area and unearthed some hidden gems.

A definite highlight, and a revelation to me of how powerful community art projects can be, came in a visit to Wandsworth Mind's Foresters centre to view a photographic exhibition. ‘Identity’ was the result of a series of workshops run for users of the centre by photographer and project facilitator Jasmine Falcolner, this striking and moving work was really thought provoking. Arresting and even haunting images were accompanied by intelligent commentary, poetry and searingly honest analytical statements. One of the participants explaining, “My photographs are painful self criticisms of my defeatist attitudes and hiding of my life-affirming potential behind my masks.” Many of the images, from both of the exhibitors, depicted a lonely, interior life, looking out at the world from the confines of an urban space. Another gem was Wimbledon Arts Studios, tucked well away down a side road between Tooting and Earlsfield, this fantastic warehouse warren of artistic activity is packed with talent and open to the public just twice a year to buy direct from the artists. I stayed far longer than I intended, and look forward to the next open event near the end of the year. Yet another rewarding afternoon was spent at ‘Family Stitch’. This initiative was organised run by Bridging Arts. People of all ages and backgrounds gathered at Southfields Library to have the chance to learn several hand embroidery stitches, with the supervision and assistance of a teacher from the Royal School of Embroidery. This was a great way of introducing many people to a first experience of this pleasurable, satisfying craft, and enabling many of the older people to re-kindle a long forgotten skill.

As part of my volunteer role I also assisted at the finale of the Arts Festival - 'The Shimmy'. This was a day long fun-filled series of events held in Wandsworth Park and Putney Wharf. Robotic creatures, treetop acrobats, choirs, interactive storytelling, live dance theatre, and a fantastic, eccentric brass band all made their mark during a fun-packed, glorious, hot sunny day next to the Thames.

The whole first experience of volunteering was enjoyable and enriching, the only downside being the sense of anti-climax I felt when the Arts Festival came to an end.

Fast forward another two months and things have improved considerably with my work on the freelance writing front, but my volunteering hasn't taken a back seat. I've recently signed up to help with the 'River and Cloth' project - a wonderful community arts venture run by Merton Council. It's tremendously rewarding and fun. Also, again through the Wandsworth Volunteer network, I'm also committed to running one of the summer workshops for young people on the 'Set Fashion Free' project.

The opportunities for volunteering are vast and varied, and you can do far more 'worthy' things than I have managed up until now. I've simply chosen to harness my existing skills and continue to learn by assisting with things that interest me anyway. The rewards for volunteering aren't measured in pounds and pence, but the pay-back comes in doors opening to new pathways and possibilities, new connections and friendships blossoming, and at the very least, interesting, varied and rewarding experiences that will enrich your life.