


# The art of giving

## Volunteering: The perspective of balance



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In 2001, disenchanted with doing my practical legal training placement in private practice, I approached the Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Service in my local area about completing three months of my placement with them. It changed my life.

It provided me many opportunities and lessons, and opened up the world of community legal centres. It was the perfect marrying of my passion and interest in women's issues, Aboriginal affairs, domestic violence, human rights, and using my legal training to help those most in need.

A year later I left Wirringa Baiya, having accepted my first position at another community legal centre, the Redfern Legal Service. The rest as they say is history.

In our often very chaotic, demanding and stressful lives, we run from one task to another, one demand to another, barely able to capture our breaths until we submit that report, finalise that proposal, or board that plane. Ah, we can finally breathe, for a moment at least before we launch ourselves head on into the next project or deadline. If only we had more time... if I didn't have to do this or that... or when I have achieved this

or become that, I can finally do.

Sounds like all too familiar excuses we make to ourselves to prolong something we want or need today; be it, to exercise and so to work on our health, go to our child's performance, or to take a holiday, to work on significant relationships, to give, to stop and do something for someone else purely for the sake of giving.

I remember reading an article on yoga, about 'being' as opposed to 'doing that' referred to us as pushing our analogue bodies to perform in a digital world. No, this is not a yoga teaching.

Growing up we probably became familiar with terms such as '*it's better to give than to receive*', '*it's good to give back*'. Australian's give very generously both financially and in kind donation. In 2010, the Australian Bureau of Statistics survey found that 6.1 million people (36%) of the Australian population aged 18 years and over participated in voluntary work, compared to 5.2 million in 2005 with women (comprising 38%) more likely to volunteer than men (34%).<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, the volunteer rate in 2010 was 41% outside capital cities

as compared to 34% for capital cities, and with 'no significant difference in rates between the capital cities, except for Darwin (43%), where the rate was higher than the overall capital city rate.'<sup>2</sup>

Further, a national survey undertaken by the National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) in 2012,<sup>3</sup> found that 95.2% of community legal centres (CLCs) surveyed utilised volunteers in some capacity. These volunteers included, in addition to lawyers and legal students in direct legal service delivery (89.2%), administrative support (72%), law reform advocacy (48.4%), community legal education (40.9%), non-legal service delivery, for example, social work or court support (16.1%), and in governance or management (16.1%). Further, 3,637 volunteers contributed to 8,369 hours of work per week to CLCs. What this report found was that the benefits derived from these hours in outcomes to the clients and the centres extended far beyond the actual hours in work given or donated. You can say that these are the hours that 'keep on giving.'

Many corporations have identified the significance of 'giving back'

to the community by adopting Corporate Social Responsibility policies and encourage or instilling in their employees a culture of volunteering, or providing pro bono assistance in unpaid hours to clients and communities in need. This includes lawyers, law firms who have established pro bono divisions, Law Societies and the Bar Associations.

Further, the term 'Pro Bono' comes from the Latin phrase 'pro bono publico' that means 'for the public good'. There are many different ways to provide your time and services for the public good free of charge. Whilst there is no accepted definition for 'pro-bono' in the legal context it generally means the provision of legal services on a free or considerably reduced fee basis. The Law Council of Australia in 1992 defined pro bono work as situations where:

1. A lawyer, without fee or without expectation of a fee, or at a reduced fee, advises and/or represents a client in cases where:
  - (i) a client has no other access to the courts and the legal system; and/or
  - (ii) the client's case raises a wider issue of public interest; or
2. The lawyer is involved in free community legal education and/or law reform; or
3. The lawyer is involved in the giving of free legal advice and/or representation to charitable and community organisations.

The Top End Women's Legal Service (TEWLS) regularly utilise volunteers to run our Wednesday evening Advice Clinic. The Wednesday Advice Clinic is both womaned and supervised by female lawyers. In addition, TEWLS Management Committee comprises volunteers, and we also regularly have law students undertaking their practical legal

placement or required pro bono hours with us. Volunteers play a significant part in our continued sustainability and add value to our services.

The added value that the diversity in the experience and training that it provides to TEWLS cannot be understated, nor can the benefits to the individual solicitor. This could be through the exposure to a new area of law, working in an area of interest or assisting at a very grass roots level. Not to mention how good this would look on your CV. Volunteering your services is more than simply giving your time free of charge. It is about treating the client or task undertaken with respect, and in a professional manner.

Through my time working in CLC's I have met some wonderful, amazing and dedicated volunteers. When at the Redfern Legal Centre (RLC), it was not uncommon for a lawyer after three or more hours volunteering at our evening advice clinics to return to their practice at 10 pm to finish up preparing for court the following day. That's real commitment. Interestingly, the RLC started in 1977 when law students, lawyers, academics, social workers and community activists united to establish it. RLC was the first community legal centre in NSW and the second in Australia.

TEWLS has just celebrated its 18 year anniversary. It has come a long way since its humble formation in which a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women volunteers came together to establish a much needed service for women in Darwin. TEWLS provides **free and confidential** legal advice in most areas of civil law, some casework, undertake community legal education and advocacy (such as through law reform) on issues of importance to the women in Darwin and surrounding areas.

The Central Australia Women's Legal Service (CAWLS) and the Katherine Women's Information &

Legal Service (KWILS) were also established in Alice Springs and Katherine to address issues and needs such as domestic violence for women.

It's wonderful that we have been celebrating International Volunteer Day celebrating each year on 5 December since its inception by United Nations General Assembly in 1985, to recognise the important contribution that volunteers can make to any organisation and to the lives of many.

In today's times, it shouldn't feel like a surprise or an exception when one human being extends courtesy or kindness to another, simply by choosing to recognise your position in a queue in the supermarket, stopping to allow you to cross at a crossing whether designated or not or simply helping you off the ground when you have fallen. What's for certain is that no matter how big or small the deed of giving is, it does leave you with a buzz, a positive sense towards our fellow human being and us. Altruism is still very much alive, and encouraged! ●

**If anyone is interested in volunteering with TEWLS, please refer to: <http://www.tewls.org.au/volunteering.php> or by contacting our office on (08) 8982 3000 or [admin@tewls.org.au](mailto:admin@tewls.org.au).**

#### (Endnotes)

1. file:///Volumes/Lexar/Research/Volunteering%20Facts%20»%20Volunteering%20Australia.webarchive. The complete Australian Bureau of Statistics survey report can be found at: <http://volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/VA-4441.0-Voluntary-Work-Australia-2010.pdf>
2. file:///Volumes/Lexar/Research/Volunteering%20Facts%20»%20Volunteering%20Australia.webarchive
3. Working Collaboratively-Community Legal Centres and Volunteers ([http://www.naclc.org.au/resources/NACLCLC\\_VOLUNTEERS\\_web.pdf](http://www.naclc.org.au/resources/NACLCLC_VOLUNTEERS_web.pdf)).