

Tuesdays with Kirk



Kirk at the gardening awards

When I became the Local Studies Librarian at Waverley Library, Sydney in September 2005 I inherited a long-standing library volunteer, Kirk Keating. As I was the third Local Studies Librarian in the position in nine months, he was understandably cynical about me: "How long are you staying for?" was his greeting on the day we met. Kirk had been volunteering in Local Studies for three years, driven by his love of local history and his commitment to making a difference in the community.

As an active local volunteer (he volunteered in many places other than the library) Kirk was well-known, immediately identifiable by his battered backpack and baseball cap, his tall lanky frame and his broad shoulders.

Kirk came into the library every Tuesday morning without fail to maintain the research files which are a vital part of the Local Studies collection. He pasted newspaper clippings onto backing paper, filed them, created new files, and did all the housekeeping necessary to keep the files current. These research files are a key source of information on the local area and are heavily used by Local Studies researchers. Kirk's regular weekly volunteering freed me from this necessary, but time-consuming, task.

I came to really look forward to Kirk's visits and his role with me soon became a lot more than just looking after research files. I discovered that Kirk was also an excellent photographer and was keen to undertake any photography requests I had. Knowing that we had few photographs of the local war memorials, honour boards, and military scrolls, he visited parks, public halls, and RSLs photographing these on our behalf.

I used to say, "Kirk, you are the eyes and ears of Local Studies. If you see anything I should know about, take a photo." He did and generously donated his photos to the Local Studies collection, which has been enriched. Some photos have been used in the creation of a calendar to mark Waverley Council's sesquicentenary. The photographs in the calendar are all Kirk's.

Kirk had severe respiratory problems and openly talked about not having a long life expectancy. We had some lovely conversations about life, choices we had made along the way, and things that we might do differently 'next time around.' He often told me how much he loved local history and would remark that 'next time around' he was going to be a Local Studies Librarian.

Kirk died in December 2007 and is still dearly missed, but I remember those conversations and sometimes feel that maybe he isn't that far away after all.

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Celebrating a volunteer at Camden Library

Camden Library staff celebrate every Monday morning when our volunteer Elaine Leary arrives bright and early to assist with the large volume of items returned over the weekend. Elaine spends from 8.30 to 12 putting the fiction shelves in impeccable order, shelving returned fiction, large print, and audio items.



Elaine, hard at work

Elaine decided to contact the library and volunteer her time after reading an article in the local paper that featured other library volunteers. Elaine had also received positive feedback from her twin granddaughters who had participated in the Duke of Edinburgh program within the library.

Over the last two years Elaine has enjoyed the opportunity to interact with staff and customers, and even promotes the library's services to friends and fellow members of her nursing home reading group. The library staff are very thankful for Elaine's assistance, particularly on a busy Monday morning; her friendly nature, enthusiasm, and dedication are an asset to the library.

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The changing nature of volunteering

There are important social benefits to having volunteers involved in the delivery of library services, and a number of studies, including the ABS Voluntary Work Survey in 2006, have linked volunteering to social capital and social inclusion.

Conics recently completed a strategic review of volunteering in a local community in Sydney, and found that the nature of volunteering is changing in important ways. While not primarily about volunteering in libraries, the research raises a number of important issues for libraries, whether they currently use volunteers or are planning to in the future.

While the proportion of the population that engages in voluntary work has increased, the amount of time spent per person volunteering has decreased. In short, people are volunteering less frequently and for shorter periods of time. In one sense, having more people offering fewer hours does not impact on volunteer-based services because the total amount of hours available remains the same; they are just offered in 'smaller packages'. But this change has important implications for the ways we run our library services.