

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.



As much as we do not like to think so, involving volunteers has costs in terms of recruiting and supervising volunteers, as well as in rostering and training them. If more people volunteer, but for less time, then managing the additional volunteers will increase these operational costs. The effect is multiplied if volunteers work infrequently. If your volunteers are only working with you a few times a year, then you may have to re-train them to undertake tasks each time they volunteer. Also, the 'packages' of time offered by volunteers may not match the current configuration of the service. For example, home library delivery runs may take a particular length of time each day. If the amount of volunteer time is too short to deliver the service, it may have to be reconfigured. This involves a cost in time, printing, etc.

It is worth emphasising that these costs already exist and that the changes in the ways people volunteer simply increase them. Many community groups recognise these costs by having paid volunteer managers or coordinators. As a former library manager, I know that, in libraries, these costs are often absorbed or hidden because the tasks are undertaken by library positions that have other roles. For example, the home library officer may have the job of managing volunteers as well as coordinating the home library service. It is important to recognise that, unless strategically managed, the increased costs of managing additional volunteers could cause the other important tasks undertaken by a library position to suffer.

Another important change is that the motivations for volunteering are more diverse than they may have appeared in the past. Altruism is now recognised as one motivation among many. People have probably always volunteered for diverse reasons, but it is becoming increasingly important to recognise this. It has been said that baby boomers, in particular, are looking for

more from volunteering than just the sense that they are helping others. 'Volunteering is its own reward' is no longer enough, and the ways in which we reward our volunteer workers need to recognise their various motivations for freely offering their time. Many volunteer-based groups, including libraries, offer rewards to volunteers such as social activities, but we may need to diversify to recognise the differences in individual motivation.

We also need to structure volunteer work to recognise these diverse and changing motivations. We found a good example in the interviews we undertook with local community groups. Sporting clubs in the local area are changing the volunteer staffing arrangement for their canteens. In the past, many groups had canteen committees that organised the running of the canteen service. These committees are increasingly being abandoned and a more flexible approach has evolved that only requires volunteers to offer short amounts of time. This change recognises that people volunteer for shorter amounts of time, but also that the prestige and social connections that come from committee membership, while once highly valued, are no longer important to a younger generation.

This example shows that volunteer-based groups are adapting to the changing volunteer workforce. To maintain the important social benefits of volunteering in libraries, and in some cases to continue to deliver services, libraries will need to recognise and respond in strategic ways to the challenges of a changing volunteer workforce.

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