

# ENGAGING WITH VOLUNTEERS

In May this year, Dr Susie Prestney was awarded the Barrett Reid Scholarship by the Library Board of Victoria. Since 1990, the Board has offered the Reid and Margery C Ramsay Scholarships to develop the leadership potential of Victorian public library staff. One scholarship of up to \$30,000 is awarded each year.

I was thrilled to be awarded this scholarship which will enable me to investigate best practice in library volunteer programs. Harnessing the community and engaging volunteers is a terrific opportunity for public libraries, which the Victorian Public Library Network has identified as a strategic priority.

Driving my project is a belief that library volunteer programs are often impeded by a culture of recruitment and management that measures output purely in terms of hours served. More often than not, volunteers are given a list of specific tasks with prescribed outcomes. For volunteers, this can present limited options and opportunities; for library staff, it can amount to pressure to create work to keep volunteers busy.

An exciting chapter of my project is an impending trip to California where I will undertake an internship at the California State Library in Sacramento, working with the renowned Get Involved: Powered by Your Library project team responsible for a state-wide initiative to enhance and extend the visibility and contributions of skilled volunteers in public libraries. I will also visit public libraries in the San Jose area that are at the forefront of award-winning library volunteer programs. My research trip will culminate at the California Library Association Conference in Oakland, where volunteer programming and training is a key theme.

Philosophically, Get Involved is not about replacing library staff with unpaid volunteers. Rather, it is about value adding to library services, programs, advocacy and support through strategic and meaningful volunteerism beyond shelving, dusting, and shelf-reading. Inspiration for seeking out new ways of working with volunteers grew from a volunteer-driven programming initiative at Woodend Library, where I job share the role of manager. Out of a casual conversation with a patron about 'knitted trees' developed a community-led art project to 'yarn bomb' the fixtures outside the library with colourful, handcrafted knitwear. The project became Warmup Woodend and volunteers from all demographics flocked to it, making the library the focal point of the community in a cold and dreary Central Victorian winter.

Warmup Woodend really demonstrated that volunteers can offer more to libraries than time, and capacity for clerical tasks.



Left to right: Dennis Goldner (Chairman, Library Board of Victoria Advisory Committee) with award winner Susie Prestney, Sue Roberts (CEO and State Librarian) and John Murrell (President of Public Libraries Victoria Network).

Getting volunteers involved in extending library programs and services is an exciting and rewarding opportunity for staff and patrons alike. I am ever grateful to the Library Board of Victoria, the State Library of Victoria, and Public Libraries Victoria Network for awarding me this scholarship, and thank the Goldfields Library Corporation for sponsoring me in this endeavour. I look forward to sharing the results of my research, and collaborating with the public library sector to implement ideas from the California experience.

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