Giving something back

Volunteers’ Week is an annual campaign that takes place from June 1 to 7. It celebrates the contribution made by millions of volunteers across the UK and encourages more people to give something back to society.

THIS year’s Volunteers’ Week will focus on saying ‘thank you’ to the millions of volunteers who regularly contribute to society. Organisations across the country will be taking part to celebrate the work of volunteers; for example, ‘Do Something Different’, in Birmingham, says it will use a ‘volunteer-o-meter’ to log the hours volunteered in the city over one week, while Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service is the ming the week ‘hats off to volunteers’ and inviting local people to show their appreciation by wearing a hat for a day. The aim is to reach new volunteers by highlighting the variety of opportunities that are available, and how they contribute to communities.

National contribution
According to Volunteering England, a charity and membership organisation which aims to support volunteering, over 20 million people across the UK volunteer every year, and it has been estimated that the economic value of this activity is worth more than £40 billion to the economy. Many vital services and initiatives simply would not exist if it wasn’t for volunteers. These include the NHS, the Coastguard Rescue Service (3500 volunteers), the Mountain and Cave Rescue Service (5500 volunteers in England and Wales), Natural England (2200 volunteer wardens), the judiciary (30,000 volunteer magistrates in England and Wales) and the police (over 15,000 special constables). Volunteers also help run national events, such as the Games Makers involved in London 2012 and, more recently, the members of the St John Ambulance who lined the route of the London marathon to help runners.

However, volunteering has a greater value than just ensuring essential community services function and that national events are a success. Volunteering England’s website (www.volunteering.org.uk) notes that, every year, millions of people help others in all sorts of ways, most of which they probably wouldn’t even think of as volunteering. This, it says, makes a crucial contribution to binding communities together, building cooperation and trust between individuals, and helping to make communities better places to live and work.

Volunteering, it points out, also benefits the individuals offering their time; it may help them learn new skills, make a difference, make new friends, be part of a team, enjoy the outdoors (and keep fit) or boost their CV.

Encouraging volunteers
At this year’s National Equine Forum, held in London on March 5, Ed Bracher, chief executive of the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) talked about the essential role of volunteers in his organisation.

The RDA, he said, was run by 18,000 volunteers who gave their time to the association’s centres all over the UK. ‘We always need more,’ he added. ‘Such people, who invest a couple of hours each week, allow the charity to provide life-changing activities and increase provision to include the thousands of people who are currently missing out.’
He described the challenges and opportunities that volunteers brought to organisations. The equine industry, he said, was heavily dependent on volunteers – be they formal volunteers, such as those working with the RDA and the Pony Club, for example, or informal volunteers – “particularly parents with trailers and the patience to help at events”. Volunteers were a diverse group, young and old, and from widely varying social backgrounds. It was no longer the case, he said, that volunteers were ‘all middle-aged, middle England women’; however, it was also not surprising that in many areas (equestrianism included) a lot of volunteers were older and more experienced.

He described how organisations could encourage volunteers and support their efforts. ‘There is now a general recognition that volunteers do not simply appear’ he said, noting that the best organisations actively recruited and supported their volunteers. This meant that organisations were, generally, competing for the time of a volunteer and, without making an effort to actively manage volunteers, organisations could quickly lose their goodwill and input.

Specifically, he said, organisations should seek to make a clear offer to volunteers at the recruitment stage and then make sure this was delivered. Without it becoming a major area of human resource management, there should be policies in place so that volunteers and the organisation knew where they stood on key issues.

Organisations needed to consider how volunteers were rewarded and acknowledged (if at all) and, crucially, should understand the motivation of the volunteer. Volunteering was a two-way process, and, he said, ‘if the volunteer does not get what they want from it, they will not return’. The motivation might be the simple altruistic sense of having helped, or it could be more specific (such as CV enhancement for younger volunteers, or the ability to spend time as a spectator at an event).

As far as the future of volunteering within equestrianism was concerned, he said that increasing numbers of young people were getting involved because the opportunity to combine their passion with personal development was a good option. But it was also an area where charities that depended on such help could make more of the health benefits of equestrian volunteering, because it offered opportunities to be active or to socialise, for example. Not all volunteers needed to be ‘horsey’; some of the key ‘behind the scenes’ roles were non-equestrian, he said.

Organisations also needed to work together – for example, through the Young Equestrian Leaders Awards (www.yela.org). This, he said, ‘combined with a more dynamic and professional outlook towards the management of volunteers, will stand us all in good stead’.

Mr Bracher pointed out that within all charities, organisations and institutions there were plenty of jobs that needed to get done. Anyone, whatever their skill set, and with a few hours to spare, had something to offer, and they were bound to find a role that suited them.

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**Ten-minute chat**

Emma Pearson took up triathlon sports as a hobby in 2009, and it wasn’t long before she qualified to compete for Great Britain. Last year she won a gold medal in the European Sprint Triathlon in Eilat, Israel. She works part time as a small animal vet in Morpeth, Northumberland.

**What made you get involved in triathlon?**
I’ve always done a lot of sport, but I started open water swimming with a triathlon club when I started work in mixed practice and got involved from there.

**What sports are involved?**
Triathlon involves swimming in open water, cycling and running. There are lots of different distance races but the main ones I do combine a 1500 m swim with a 40 km bike race and, finally, a 10 km run.

**How do you fit the training in alongside being a vet?**
When I was working full time I used to get a training session in before and after work, but now I have a bit more time to recover as well!

**What do you like about your job?**
I love challenging medical cases, but also liaising with owners while their pets are in our hospital. I want to make sure they are fully informed as to how their pet is doing and understand what we are doing and why.

**What advice would you give to someone considering becoming an elite athlete?**
To understand that the commitment isn’t just about training more, but that the sacrifices involved include financial and lifestyle choices. I have a massively supportive husband and couldn’t do it without him.

**What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?**
Never to look back in regret, but to move on to the next thing. A setback is never a bad experience, just something to learn from.

**What was your proudest moment?**
Graduating from vet school.
Ten-minute chat

Emma Pearson

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