

What does the Community and the Volunteer get out of Volunteerism?

Let me start by telling you what the community gets out of volunteerism. The *Volunteering SA-NT* website tells us that in South Australia the volunteering effort is valued at around \$5 billion per year. That's about 65 times Clive Palmer's advertising bill for the last 3 months. I think that State gets more than 65 times the value out of us than Clive got out of his spending spree.

So is that why we volunteer? To give away \$5 billion? Why did we volunteer in the first place?

I didn't come from a volunteering background. When I was about 18 my 20 year-old brother joined St John Ambulance Brigade. After hearing about St John from him for a few months I decided to join too. I really don't know why either of us joined. Thoughts of altruism and giving back to the community, and all those nice things that keep us coming back probably did not enter my head initially. It just seemed like a good idea at the time, and when my mates asked how much I got paid they could not believe I did not get paid 1 cent.

Let me just remind you that from the early 1950s until 1991 the St John Ambulance Brigade ran the ambulance service in South Australia with a combination of paid professional staff and volunteers. In Adelaide and larger rural cities and regions the "Paydies" worked the day shift and the cars were crewed by volunteers overnight and on week-ends. We all had the same training but by today's standards it was pretty basic. In the smaller country towns the ambulance services were entirely volunteers.

Personally, as a volunteer, St John Ambulance was enormously rewarding. I'd meet people who were sick or injured and have them in my care for half an hour or so. During that time we did our best to ease the pain or discomfort, tend their injuries, care for their illness and deliver them to hospital in a better state than they were in when we met them. To know that I had helped somebody in that way was hugely satisfying. And then there were the times when I would finish my shift and go home knowing that somebody who could have died will wake up the following day because of what I did. Just think how that might make you feel.

Of course there were the downsides. More than 50 years later I still remember every detail about the time a person died while in my care. I didn't sleep for the next 3 nights I couldn't get it out of my mind. **But you don't stop! You can't stop.** Eventually I accepted that I did my very best and there was nothing more I could do for that lady

The whole experience of St John taught me about life in all glory, and death in all its sadness; it shaped my attitude to both.

I served St John throughout the state for 22 years. There were also service clubs and community organisations, community hospital boards, school councils, sporting club committees, state associations.

I worked for a bank and moved around. After we were married we lived in Adelaide, Port Lincoln, Adelaide (again,) Ceduna, Robe, Port Lincoln (again), Loxton and Port Augusta before returning to Adelaide permanently in 1989.

One thing the itinerant population learns is that the locals won't come to you and thank you for coming to live in their town. If you want to enjoy living there, you have to be part of it, so bankies, police, teachers, post office and Telstra people, and many other itinerant occupations head for sporting clubs, churches and community groups.

Fast forward a few years. I was running my own training consultancy firm – working hard but happily. I had a cancer incident that made me realise I was here for a good time, not a long time. So I began planning the wind-down of my business and transition into retirement. I noticed in the ADVERTISER that COTA was looking for Peer Educators to speak to seniors groups. “OK! That's what I do professionally – talk to groups”. I was interviewed by Michelle Elding and Germaine. They noticed that I didn't have 2 heads and I fooled them into thinking I was mildly competent. And that's where my COTA involvement began. I've averaged 1 Peer Ed session every fortnight for 12 years. They seem to think that's acceptable and have made me a life member, which I value most highly. Remember, the highest award any organisation can grant is life membership. I am most honoured to have received that award.

Several years ago I was to honoured with investiture as a serving brother into the Royal Order of St John. WOW! For most of us, this is THE recognition of the work done for St John – this is like the AO of St John. The Queen is the head of the Order, and the investiture is conducted by the Governor at Government House.

I congratulate those of you who have been honoured today with awards in recognition of your voluntary service to COTA. I personally thank you for contributing freely to my community. As volunteers we accept this recognition with gratitude. We all say that we are not here to collect awards – but we certainly do appreciate the “thank yous” we receive. We feel that we have a combination of skills, knowledge and above all, the desire to give something back to the community in which we are fortunate enough to live. We are motivated by something in us which tells us to go do something for somebody else. We are here to use our particular talents and knowledge to help people who may not be as fortunate as we are at that moment. If we’ve got skills or knowledge to share, then let’s do it.

I believe it reflects highly on COTA that this organisation recognises and thanks its volunteers, and then does it again and again and again.

It was at two COTA Peer Education sessions that I got some of my biggest buzzes. At the end of a Beyond Maturity Blues session (on depression) in a country town a lady came to me and, with a tear in her eye, said, “Thank you, Martin. You have changed my life.” I will never forget that moment. And then a few hours later, same topic in a different town, a man obviously sitting next to his wife, stood up and said, “Thank you Martin. We have a doctor’s appointment for my wife this afternoon – and now we know what her trouble is.” That was a great day, and that, my friends, is why we volunteers keep coming back.