

CASE STUDY – NATALIE WRAY

"If someone had asked me four years ago, what I knew about volunteering and what are the benefits, my answer to both probably would have been, 'not a lot'. In 2005, I started working at the University of Lincoln as part of the Community Volunteers Team. I was not working there for long when I realised how naïve I had been. I started to appreciate the endless possibilities that volunteering can bring to anyone that volunteers and to those on the receiving end of volunteers.

Once I found my feet, I started volunteering. I started to peer mentor a 15-year-old school pupil. As part of my mentoring, I encouraged the pupil to maximise her potential at school, attend school regularly, prepare for her exams, supplied her with information about further and higher education, built her confidence and self-esteem whilst also giving her a sense of purpose and direction. At the end of the mentoring, I received gratitude by the head teacher of the school; I was informed that the pupil achieved seven GCSE passes, 5 C+. This was a very positive experience for both the pupil and myself. It gave me an insight of what volunteering is really about and gave me a taste of how rewarding it really is.

After my mentoring had finished I started volunteering for Lincolns Women's Aid. Lincolns Women's Aid is a helping organisation that involves making a valuable contribution towards changing the lives of women and children suffering from domestic violence and abuse. It provides safe temporary accommodation, (refuges), information and support. This was a very valuable volunteering experience for me. I have also taken part on numerous fundraising activities and projects, raising money for Cancer Research UK, Marie Curie Cancer Care, Hope for Children and The Royal British Legion. I have also recently applied to join Age Concern as a 'Wheeler and Walker Befriender'.

My current voluntary role is with SOVA. I have undergone a 24-hour introductory training course, which has given me skills to work effectively with young people and given me the understanding of child protection and risk assessments. I mentor one young person at a time for a period of four to six months. The young people are referred from the Youth Offending Service, as they are at risk of offending or have already offended. The mentoring roles are extremely challenging and constantly test my abilities to cope in complex situations. I am currently completing an OCN level 3 Accreditation, as a Social Services/ SOVA Volunteer. I give all my voluntary roles a high level of commitment and support, and feel my interpersonal skills learned are immeasurable. Volunteering for SOVA has made me appreciate the importance of being open minded and non-judgemental. It has shown me that being able to be patient and tolerant has very positive results.

My volunteering experience with SOVA has so far been extremely rewarding in so many ways. I have learnt so much; not only about SOVA, but also about our local community and about myself. I can really feel my own self-confidence growing over time through my volunteering. As well as giving me confidence, work experience and me my own self-development. It has also given me the opportunity to do what I am really passionate about and enjoy, and that's trying to help and make a difference to young people's lives.

My volunteering so far has opened so many doors for my self-development. It has given me a chosen career path in Social Work, which I started this September at the University of Lincoln. It has supported my university and job applications, and it has contributed towards a recent job offer as a Support Worker at St Giles Youth Centre. Volunteering has given me a career, friends, satisfaction and much more self-confidence. It has changed me as a person; it has opened my eyes and affected me in so many ways. It has also given me an opportunity to give something back to the community I live in. I have seen so many cases of how volunteering has touched peoples lives and I have now experienced, how a few hours of my time everyweek can really make a positive difference to a persons life." (Natalie Wray, 1st Year Social Work Student, University of Lincoln, 2008).