



Sally's volunteering story



Age: 77

Charity: Hearing Dogs for Deaf People

Years volunteering: 15

How did you get involved with Hearing Dogs for Deaf People?

I began to go deaf in my mid-50s. I was in the audiologist's office, and I saw a poster for lipreading classes. I went along and met a lady there (Eileen), who had a hearing dog. I'd never heard of the charity before, and I thought what the dogs did was amazing.

Eileen told me how her hearing dog had changed her life but also told me she'd had to wait a long time before she was partnered with him/her. I knew then that I wanted to do something to help.

What sort of things do you do?

Four of us – myself, Eileen, Lyndsay (who was on the waiting list for a hearing dog) and her husband, organised a sponsored walk. We raised £2,000, and afterwards, someone from the charity asked if I would be interested in being the charity's representative in East Sussex. The idea of volunteering had never even occurred to me before then.

Gradually, our fundraising activities grew. We held garden parties, coffee mornings and bucket collections. To mark my 75th birthday, I even abseiled twice down the Spinnaker Tower in Portsmouth! I also began giving talks about the charity to different community groups.

Two years ago, I was named Volunteer of the Month by the charity in recognition of my work. Together, my team and I have raised well over £25,000 over the years.

How do you feel when you finish a volunteering activity?

I love it! You're raising awareness and funds for the charity. It can't help but make you feel good.

What has volunteering taught you?

It's helped me to accept my deafness more because I'm spending time with people who are in the same boat as me.

It's also taught me that awareness of the challenges deaf people face among hearing people can be very low. When I first started as a speaker, a man in the audience asked, 'What's the point of a hearing dog?' It struck me then that he had no concept of what it was like to be deaf. Now, I start my talks with real-life experiences of what it's like to become deaf.

Does it change how you look at other parts of your life?

It's taught me compassion. I'm a different person to how I used to be – much calmer, more patient and more compassionate. I want to be doing things to help people.

What's the best thing about volunteering?

The people you meet. I've got so many lasting friendships with people I've met through Hearing Dogs.

Has it impacted your mental health in a positive way?

Definitely! It makes you push yourself to do things. I lost my husband a couple of years ago. He was a big help with my fundraising. I do have days when I'm feeling a little low, but if I'm booked to go out and do a talk, it shakes me up and the people who come to the talks are so friendly and interested in what I'm saying, I always feel so much better afterwards.

Do you get to see the impact of your volunteering work? If so, what does this look like?

Yes, you get to hear so many wonderful stories of people who have hearing dogs and the difference their dog has made to their life.

What's the most rewarding part of volunteering?

Knowing I've helped raise money that will help the charity go on to train more hearing dogs.

Also, when you've given a talk and you can see that you've changed people's perception of what it means to be deaf.

And the knock-on effects. You never know who might sponsor a puppy or donate to the charity after coming to a talk you've given. A lady who attended one of my talks came up to me weeks afterwards. Sadly, her mum had just passed away, but she said that her mum had always liked dogs, and she wanted to give me a cheque to pass on to the charity from her mum.

What would you say to someone considering volunteering?

I'd say, 'go for it!'. Even if you can only spare an hour a week – every little helps. It doesn't matter how much or little you do; it still gives you a feeling of doing something worthwhile.

The knowledge that you're doing something to help does you the world of good.

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