

Should I Volunteer?

by Linda Chaiko-Lepley

Deciding what to do when one retires can be a difficult decision. We often look forward to retirement, but when the time comes it turns out to be something different than what we had expected.

When we retire, we are often not ready because that personal connection that we had at work or that sense of purpose is now gone. Instead of a life of luxury and enjoyment, retirement can result in a void that we had not expected. One way to fill that void and still enjoy the benefits of retirement is through volunteerism.

Volunteering provides physical, mental and social benefits. Research has shown that the social interaction provided by volunteerism improves brain function and lowers the risk of depression. We become more connected with others and keep busy without the stresses of the work world. Volunteering makes us feel good because we are helping others not because of a job but because we want to. It increases our sense of purpose and our sense of accomplishment. It also allows us to follow our passions and get involved in work that we could not do before because we were too busy working.

When Mary first retired she took a class at the Placer Adult School entitled, "What were you born to do." "It was a class for people soon to be retired or at a career stall," explains Mary. "We were advised not to rush into anything for a year and only do what we wanted to do."

Mary followed the instructor's advice and enjoyed retirement doing whatever she wanted. "I could now sleep in, read a book, work in the garden, take a walk, visit the local parks, visit my grandkids in Oregon and do all the things that I didn't have the time to do before." But this life of luxury of doing only the things that she wanted, but hadn't had time to do before didn't last long. "I am a homebody," says Mary, "but I also needed to see what others were doing. I believe in meeting people face-to-face and hearing their stories."

Looking for that personal connection, Mary turned to volunteer work and discovered the Placer Nature Center in Auburn, California. She has now been a docent there for almost four years and is also a board member. "I've always enjoyed working with kids and I've always liked nature," she explains. It was a perfect fit for Mary. "Nature is simple and doesn't cost anything," she says. "You can admire nature by simply watching a river flow, or you can jump into the river and swim. You don't have to be a big outdoor person to enjoy nature." Mary enjoys nature every time she is at the Placer Nature Center either leading a group of school age children in various educational activities about nature or taking them on a hike. The children are bused in to the nature center from schools throughout the area or are brought in by parents who are home schooling their children.

Linda, another docent at the Placer Nature Center, has loved being outdoors and adventurous ever since she was a child. "PNC allows me to live out this passion and gives me the opportunity to do what I love as well as an opportunity to make a positive contribution to our world." According to Linda, who was a special education teacher before retiring, nature is very good for children. She refers to Last Child in the

Woods by Richard Louv, which was the first book that shows that research has indicated that exposure to nature for children is essential for a healthy childhood development and that it contributes to the physical and emotional health of both children and adults. Some of the children, who come to the Placer Nature Center, have never seen a trail, have never gone hiking. They are city kids who have never experienced the wonders of nature, and coming to the Placer Nature Center opens up a new world for them, a world that Linda loves sharing. “My parents were a role model for me”, explains Linda. “They hiked well into their 80s. I also want to hike into my 80’s,” says Linda, 72. “I want to share this experience with children, share nature with them, so that they too will become role models for their children.”

Sally started volunteering at the Placer Nature Center in 1994. She likes volunteering because she can make her own schedule. “I don’t volunteer full time because I wouldn’t like it then,” she explains. “When I volunteer in the morning, I can go to the gym in the afternoon. In the afternoon, I am free to do whatever I want to.” Sally likes working with children, and she gets excited about teaching them about nature. Although she sometimes wonders if she is smarter than the 5th graders who come to the Nature Center, and doesn’t consider herself a trained naturalist or biologist, she doesn’t worry about it much. “I just enjoy working with the kids”, she says. “Today the kids will say something about cable TV, but I don’t have cable. They say something that could be right, but I’m okay with this. “

The Placer Nature Center is okay with this too. To help docents overcome their fear of not knowing enough, PNC offers training for its docents, and new docents can also shadow experienced ones until they feel confident to take their own groups. “I wish more people would volunteer, says Mary.” “Many people think they don’t have enough to offer, but they do.” Mary’s advice is not to assume that you don’t fit an organization. Her advice is to ask people, inquire about things that you don’t know about first, and learn about the opportunity before making a final decision.

For more information about docent opportunities or other volunteer opportunities, school programs or home school programs at the Placer Nature Center, contact Dave Matthews, executive director at dmatthews@placernaturecenter.org or call 530-878-6053.