Are volunteer’s motives important?

A 2008 survey showed that 23 per cent of youths aged 15 to 24 were volunteers, the highest percentage among all age groups. But are they volunteering for the right reasons, or because they feel obliged? And is that better than not volunteering at all? YouthLink writers respond.

Don’t just do it as a one-off

Many of my peers choose the easy route of one-off volunteer activities. But if one really wants to make a significant difference, I suggest they take up the challenge of organising their own long-term volunteer project. I believe this is the true test of one’s passion to serve society.

Three years ago, being young and ambitious and determined to define what community service means to me, I decided to develop an original community service project. I wanted to organise camps and workshops for under-privileged children.

Even though my first proposal was rejected outright by a voluntary welfare organisation, I was undaunted. I revised my proposal, and after a month, approached the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC). Its manager welcomed me warmly, listened patiently and gave me advice.

Over the next 1½ years, I realised that community service shouldn’t be for the hours clocked, but rather the sense of achievement and knowledge that one has made a difference to someone’s life.

I made close friends with my team members and the children, and to my delight, my junior volunteers to take over the helm and continue liaising with CDAC after I left junior college.

I certainly look forward to incorporating community service into my daily life. Nicholas Lim, 20, will read business at Nanyang Technological University this year.

Volunteer out of passion

When I was in secondary school and junior college, community involvement formed a significant portion of our CCA records.

The practical student’s only motivation was to chalk up the minimum required hours, while others chalked up 80 hours so as to get an A. Call me cynical, but I am pretty sure these are the reasons many youths volunteer.

Now that I am out of the system, I volunteer only if I am convinced it is for a worthy cause, and better yet if I can combine it with my passion, which is dance.

Working as a part-time dance instructor, I conducted a class for a group of intellectually disabled students from Minds Touster Gardens School. It was a learning experience for me as much as it was for them.

Some of my friends have also volunteered with Redefinition, a hip-hop dance group for the hearing impaired. I have seen these hearing-impaired dancers and am truly impressed by their grit and courage. Their disability is no hindrance to them in pursuing their craft and they have deeply inspired me.

Over the next year, I will be a second-year law student at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Commit for a longer term

Having more volunteers may not be an advantage if they leave after only a short while, as it requires resources to manage and groom each one.

After four years with Awee, an organisation that trains youth leaders to embark on international exchanges and run their own community service projects, I have regularly seen two-thirds of new members leave after only a year.

Thankfully, about 70 of the 200- strong Singapore chapter of Awee stay to contribute for two years or more. They take up leadership roles, transfer their experience to new members as mentors, improve on existing functions, and ensure that new long-term initiatives are implemented.

For the good of the organisation, volunteers should commit for a longer period of time and introduce more sustainable initiatives. This will increase the impact of their efforts as the organisation benefits from having a larger pool of experienced volunteers.

Remy Tan, 24, a first-year economics student at Singapore Management University (SMU).

Teaching lives

In JUNIOR college, I didn’t put much thought into selecting where I volunteered because I felt pressured to complete the mandatory six-hour requirement for community involvement.

I took the easy way out and volunteered with the National Library Board. Looking back, my choice was meaningless as I felt obliged to do it; there was no burning need that compelled me to do more than clock in the required hours.

I realised what I truly wanted was to directly touch the lives of others, such as those from old folks’ homes and orphanages.

One day I volunteered at a family service centre. I was asked to clean up the centre, which had not been maintained for some time.

Although I did not contribute much, it was definitely worth it because I knew that I had performed a vital task.

Conclusion: Only altruistic motives should govern one’s desire to volunteer. Mohamed Fauzi Domen, 21, is a fresher in politics major at NUS.

The end justifies the means

SMU undergraduates must fulfil a quota of Community Involvement Programme (CIP) hours. Masses of students go for overseas CIP or engage in some large-scale CIP during the holidays.

I believe this is wrong because putting in the CIP hours is one graduation criterion, hence there are many student-initiated projects. This is painfully evident when, in a bid to get participants, some projects guarantee that participation will allow students to get their CIP hours over and done with.

But I don’t think the source of motivation matters, as society still benefits. Benevolence would be worse off if they relied only on a small group of altruistic individuals. It is better to receive some sort of help than no help at all.

Furthermore, the projects that students come up with do meet their objectives of raising funds and awareness, or providing general assistance to the beneficiaries.

Owen Yeo, 21, is a first-year social science student at SMU.