

Press release

Monday 26 September 2005 - Timebank

Retired but not redundant

Campaign launched to tap into potential older volunteers

The voluntary sector is today (Monday 26th September), the start of Age Concern Week (1), being urged to tap into the growing over 55s demographic as a potential, but neglected, source of volunteers.

National volunteering charity TimeBank and VITA (2) have launched a national campaign, The 'V' Word, that aims to both challenge negative perceptions of ageing and to show over 55s all the positive benefits that volunteering in the 21st century can offer.

Whilst participation in volunteering has increased in younger age groups, who have increasingly recognised the benefits volunteering brings, it has decreased amongst older people - 'traditional' volunteers. Research has found that it's those who appear to have the least time available that tend to be most active in their communities (eg people with school age children and those with caring responsibilities), whilst older and unemployed people are the least active (3).

"In ten years time, half the UK's population will be over 50 - this is the fastest growing and most powerful demographic, yet this group remains under represented in volunteering compared with people in their 30s and 40s," says Sheila Windsor, VITA programme director.

"Only 27 per cent of people aged 65 and over participate in community and voluntary activities. People over 75 and over are least likely to volunteer.

"The voluntary sector is missing out on a volunteer force who have proved themselves to be more flexible and reliable than younger volunteers, as well as being able to offer a wealth of experience."

Kate Hill, VITA partnerships manager says: "There's a new type of retired person who is active and busy, we need to reach these people by showing them interesting volunteering opportunities to get them invigorated. But the voluntary sector needs to be more innovative as well. All too often organisations underestimate the roles retired people can play, and assume that they should not be challenging."

The V Word campaign launches with a photography exhibition of older volunteers in the 21st century taken by renowned photographer Lorentz Gullachsen (4). The exhibition, which opens today, aims to raise awareness amongst those over 55 of the positive aspects of volunteering.

Martyn Lewis CBE, who is opening the exhibition, says: "Volunteering in the 21st century is more diverse than ever before and offers opportunities for older and retired people to have fun whilst feeling valued and being engaged with their communities. Everyone has something to offer and can benefit positively from being actively involved with volunteering."

Older volunteers are not simply young volunteers grown up. The Carnegie-TSB Foundation's Third Age Volunteering Project found that half of older volunteers started volunteering after they were 50 years old (5). Older people say they volunteer because it makes them feel valued, is sociable, keeps them active and helps bridge the step between paid employment and retirement.

Geoff Prosser, is 67 and lives in Pulborough, West Sussex. He is one of 12 volunteers featured in the exhibition (6).

"When I retired, at the end of 1997, I wanted to do something to keep active but wasn't sure what I wanted to do, so I had a bit of time off whilst I thought about it. Eventually, The London Sailing Project came to my notice. I'd always sailed boats and so I contacted them to see if I could be of help and they invited me to go and have a chat with them.

"The London Sailing Project is based near Southampton and they run week long sailing trips for young people aged 15-18 years. The boys and girls come from all kinds of backgrounds, from gap year students to pupils from special needs schools. The Sailing Project also runs trips for people with mental or physical disabilities.

"Initially I sailed as a 'spare part' as I needed qualifications to sail as crew. But the London Sailing Project arranged for me to train up to the level of Yachtmaster, which gives people the skills to sail and navigate in most waters and conditions. I'm now a volunteer watch officer - one of a crew of four called the 'Afterguard': skipper, mate and two watch officers.

"Before I retired I worked for a science and engineering consultancy and I just didn't have the time to volunteer

and be able to do justice to it. My primary voluntary activity now is the London Sailing Project. I volunteer on three or four sailing weekends a year and do one or two full week sail training voyages, usually to France or the Channel Islands. During the winter I spend 50-60 hours updating the sailing charts.

"It's good fun and I thoroughly enjoy it - I get a lot out of seeing how much the boys and girls enjoy the experience too. I plan to continue until I'm too old and feeble to do so. Long may it last!"

Volunteering by older people benefits both the individual and the organisation to which they offer their services. For the older person voluntary work can:

- help maintain a sense of purpose and self-respect, particularly for those who have retired from paid work
- lessen the isolation felt by those cut off from social networks in the workplace and from their families
- have beneficial effects on physical and mental health

For the volunteer-involving agency older volunteers bring:

- maturity, skills and experience - gained from both inside and outside the workplace
- availability – as older people usually have more time to spare and are more flexible in terms of when they work
- loyalty – research shows that older people are more likely to be content with their voluntary work and to stick with it
- numbers – there has been a steep rise in the number of older people as a proportion of the population, which offers a pool of available volunteers to tap into

To find out more about volunteering go to www.v-word.org.uk or call 0845 601 4008 or text VOL to 007766 40 41 42.

For further information, images or to attend the photography exhibition private view please