Elderly participation: my experience as a retiree

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1. Introduction

Adaptation to life after retirement can be a challenge. In spite of being psychologically prepared, retirees often experience the feelings of idleness and restlessness. In order to be able to adapt, retirees must learn how to make their life more enjoyable and meaningful. Based on my experience, I suggest volunteering which is meaningful to the individual, family and the community at large. Volunteering can also result in personal growth as it is not only a process of giving but also learning as well. In this paper, I would like to share five of the most essential “ingredients” that would make volunteering a success. These pointers will also help Elderly Centres to recruit volunteers.

In performing our duties as volunteers, we also need to be aware of our environment. We have to understand our current situation and to deal with the reality. The prevailing problems in Hong Kong are first, the ageing of population. The number of elderly has been increasing sharply. This is reflected in the number of elderly homes that has outnumbered kindergartens and nurseries. Statistics show that (Census and Statistics Department 2004) indicated the proportion of elderly population will be 1/4 by 2030. Secondly, there has been a reduction in the funding for the elderly. As the government is allocating less to the elderly, we are constrained by
the availability of funds and hence we need to focus on giving aids to the very deserving elderly only. I therefore wish to appeal to those elders who are capable of self-care to come forward to help those who need help.

2. My Experience

My name is Peter. I am 64 years old (born in 1941). I had worked in Mainland China for 20 years before I retired at the age of 60 in December 2001. I became a member of The Hong Kong Society for the Aged (SAGE) in May 2002.

Although I was psychologically well-prepared for retirement, I was ill at ease and sometimes tense after retirement. I suddenly found that I was missing work life a lot including a sense of loss of regular income, work opportunities, colleagues, social gatherings, and etc. I found life to be without purpose, allowing myself to creep into idleness. In fact, I found that I had so much time that I took to wandering through the territory and joined tours such as “Hong Kong One Day Tour”, watching TV round the clock, sleeping all day long or playing mahjong with neighbors. This sort of aimless and meaningless life lasted for six months.

During this time, my gout relapsed and analgesic was of no help at all. The pain was rather excruciating which confined me to bed. I had to see the doctor. As my wife was not able to take me to the doctor, I had to seek assistance from the “Elderly Centre” where my wife is a volunteer tutor for
elderly in Chinese painting and calligraphy. A volunteer from the Elderly Centre then put me in a wheelchair and accompanied me to see the doctor. I recovered after spending ten days in the hospital. After recovery, I seriously considered my life options: the first option is to live aimlessly just as how I had lived previously. The second one is to work as a volunteer for the “Elderly Centre” so that I can help and share with others just as how others have helped me during my difficult times. I chose the second option and I joined the “Elderly Centre” as a member as well as a volunteer.

Another chapter of my life began after I became a member of the “Elderly Centre”. I have the opportunities to pursue my interest which I have never had the chance previously. I joined the Cantonese opera class, choir group, electric piano class, Taichi class, etc. I am very grateful to the supervisors at the Centre and other fellow social workers for their enthusiastic attitude and encouragement. I was given time to adapt myself to the volunteer work as well as to enable me to share my knowledge and experience with other members. I am pleased to find that what I do for others is being appreciated. Though this is a non-paid job, I find great satisfaction. I now share with you my work, role and experiences as a volunteer.

1. Planning and conducting “social issue forum” for members’ newsletters, summarizing social and global news;
2. Planning and conducting “policy discussion forum” specializing in discussing and analyzing news and public sector/government policies;

3. Planning and organizing seminars and talks on topics specifically tailored to male members. Topics are wide ranging and speakers comprise medical practitioners, social workers, tourist guides, Taichi masters and others;

4. Choir group performance;

5. As a tutor:
   I conducted tutorial classes on “Speaking Techniques Training for the Elderly – Be a competent and Self-confident Leader” and “Structure of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (HKSAR)”.

6. Chairman of SAGE Senior Council – As the Chairman of SAGE, my responsibilities include: convene meetings, draft agenda, assign jobs, and monitor progress. Overall, the scope of my work covers two broad categories. They are as follows:

   Within the Organisation, my duties include: (i) To encourage elderly to participate actively in the activities organized by SAGE. To stimulate and encourage the elderly to give ideas and suggestions regarding services of SAGE, (ii) To formulate and monitor development and
annual plans for SAGE, and (iii) To represent SAGE in activities and functions. For example, I attended the 2003 Senior Day as SAGE representative.

Within the larger community, I am involved in networking with similar organizations, sharing experience, encouraging elders to be interested and concerned about social policies and related issues as well as to increase the scope and depth of activity participation among elderly. At the community level, I work towards sensitizing the community about the rights of elderly and to forge closer ties between elderly and the community. The long-term plan is to establish an organization that is managed and operated by the elderly themselves that is accessible to all who are aged 60 years and older.

7. My personal achievement as an elderly person is to be elected as the Outstanding Elderly Volunteers in 2004-2005. Having worked as a volunteer for the past three years, I feel that as volunteers, everyone has something to contribute. Volunteering does not discriminate the rich from the poor, the educated from the less educated. It is also not age or gender bias. There will always be a place and a role for every volunteer.
3. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say that my wife and I have been involved in volunteering and we both find it to be fulfilling. We have great pleasure in conducting our activities and we derive great satisfaction from our work as volunteers. Our family gives us the support and encouragement and there is no single moment that we feel depressed or dejected. I pace the schedule of my work and I am proud to say that I have won the admiration of my colleagues as well as gained recognition from the community that I serve. Based on my vast experience as a volunteer, I would urge everyone to join me as volunteers.

From the experience that I have gained, I would like to share the principles and practice that I feel are important for success in volunteering. They are as follows:

1. Caring Attitude – these are the crux of volunteering. Everything begins with concern and care.

2. Confidence – confidence is the precursor for courage which would make a difference to achievement/results.

3. Perseverance – volunteering requires commitment and continuous effort.
4. Stay Close to One’s Ability – not to undertake task beyond your capability.

5. Receptivity – be prepared to receive comments, suggestions and new ideas.

With my years of experience and devotion to voluntary work, I find that there are fewer male volunteers compared to females. In addition, I observe that those who are less well-off financially as well as less educated are more willing to serve as volunteers compared to those who are rich and educated. We need those better educated individuals who are willing to take up some advocacy work. The elderly usually take to volunteering because of persuasions from their family or their friends.

I personally believe that organizations providing services to elderly should not stretch their existing resources too thin. Instead, these organizations should go on a membership drive to encourage more elderly people to become members. This requires promotional efforts. In promoting volunteering among the elderly, I believe that intrinsic benefits gained from performing voluntary work are the driving force. The sense of achievement and self-worth derived from helping others is immense and indirectly this “energizes” the individual to work further to enrich the life of others in the community. Some of the suggestions for recruiting new members are outlined below:
1. Service leaflet to be dispatched to mail boxes of each building and brochures to publicize the service of elderly centre

2. To recruit elder leaders for different programs;

3. Establish a system of reward such as certificate, announcement of outstanding member on notices board to encourage existing members to introduce new members, and

4. Set up a working team/committee to look into the prospects of membership drive and to increase the capacity of the organisation

To me “Helping others is happiness” and I would like to take this opportunity to thank SAGE for giving me the care, support, guidance and encouragement. Lastly I wish all of you a healthy, comfortable and happy elderly life.

4. Bibliography

Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) at Lingnan University

HISTORY

The Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) was established as a University-wide institute in 1998 and has been operating as one of the research centers in the Institute of Humanities and Social Science (IHSS) since September 2001. The mission of APIAS is to facilitate and develop research in gerontology and issues related to population ageing in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.

OUR MISSION

“To develop a better environment for older people and their families in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.”

OUR OBJECTIVES

- To develop an area of research excellence in programme evaluation and action research; both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.
- To strengthen our collaboration within the Lingnan University and the local communities, particularly in relation to student learning.
- To strengthen the collaboration and network amongst the Asia-Pacific region.

For further information on APIAS and opportunities for research collaboration and affiliations with the Centre, please contact us:

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