



Santa's Little Helpers

Christmas comes but once a year. And boy, it's been a year. We meet the volunteers supporting vulnerable Australians and find out how they're delivering what the season's all about – community, connection and a comforting meal.

by **Anastasia Safioleas** *Contributing Editor*

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As dawn breaks over Western Sydney, retiree Ron Kelly walks into Foodbank's cavernous warehouse in Glendenning and begins work. Aisles of storage racks holding produce are inspected and numerous dispatches organised. There's a long list of odd jobs to tick off, such as hauling out a thousand loaves of bread. All this before the rest of the team begin arriving for a day of packing and sorting food, which at this time of year also includes filling Christmas hampers with canned ham, Christmas pudding and a range of staples. The former motor mechanic is one of the many volunteers making it possible for Australia's largest food relief organisation to stay open and do what it does best – deliver food to charities feeding vulnerable Australians. Just like Kelly, millions of Australians from all walks of life help keep our charities afloat. But this year the pandemic has forced non-profit organisations to adapt and find new ways to work with fewer volunteers, all while experiencing an increase in demand for their services. Kelly is one of those invaluable volunteers who has helped to weather the storm.

"Five years ago, the company I was working for closed up," explains Kelly. "I tried to get another job but I was either too old or too experienced, so I went to Centrelink. They suggested I try to volunteer, and I ended up at Foodbank." Kelly has been with them ever since, working two days each week while his wife Margaret, who caught the volunteering bug alongside her husband, helps out in the office. It makes him feel good to see there are organisations like Foodbank who can help people, particularly as the festive season approaches.

The not-for-profit calls itself a "massive pantry". Supplying food to soup vans and community kitchens, shelters, local welfare agencies, as well as school breakfast and lunch programs, it provides around 210,000 meals each day, a mammoth task that would otherwise be impossible without volunteers like Ron and Margaret.

Luke Chesworth, volunteer coordinator for Foodbank in NSW, helps mobilise up to 270 volunteers per week at the Glendenning warehouse. He is often bowled over by the generosity of his volunteers.

"One volunteer has been coming in for 10 years now," he says. "I get really impressed when I hear stories from some of our partner organisations about people that have volunteered for 26 years!"

Volunteering Australia reports that each year close to six million Australians contribute nearly 600 million volunteer hours to charities, not-for-profits and community organisations such as sporting clubs. Men and women volunteer at similar rates, although women tend to do it for longer. The age at which you are most likely to volunteer? Anywhere between 40 to 54.

For almost 20 years, Sydney's Wayside Chapel has blocked off their street in the heart of Kings Cross to host a festive Christmas Day lunch. Beneath a gigantic tent, rows of trestle tables festooned with balloons heave with Christmas revellers. Here the young and old, rich and poor, as well as the odd prime minister, come together to eat prawns and sit on Santa's knee. After lunch, a band will crank up the live music and a 400-strong conga line will snake up and down Hughes Street.

But according to Wayside's chief executive Pastor Jon Owen, "the Christmas cheer this year has got to change". Instead of a street party, the chapel is planning a week-long celebration with multiple smaller lunch sittings for people who are experiencing isolation and homelessness, as well as providing free takeaway meals on Christmas Day. Facilities will also open on Christmas Day so people can shower before visiting family, while outreach teams will head out in vans to anyone sleeping rough and take the Christmas spirit to them. As Owen puts it: "It's not negotiable that we don't celebrate Christmas this year, particularly after the year we've all been through."

Volunteers are at the heart of the celebrations. All year round 500 of them help meet the needs of the Wayside community, people experiencing extreme disadvantage. Pip Fell is one of those volunteers. She can usually be found greeting visitors from behind the front desk at the chapel's Bondi community centre.

"I started dropping things off, like undies and toothbrushes and socks, and realised that there was a really great volunteer workforce there," she explains.

While the flexibility of casual work allows Fell to donate her time, it's the satisfaction of volunteering that makes her turn up each week.

"It feels really good going there and helping that amazing community of people," she says. "It's an honour to be a part of it, to be honest."

James is 36 and until recently was a Wayside Chapel regular visitor for 10 years. Here a friendly volunteer would often hand him a hot meal, fresh toiletries or a change of clean clothes. "You think you have that foundation and one day it's gone," he explains. "The volunteers [at Wayside] are very important. They can help you with anything. And they are always good for a chat and a laugh. And if one of my case workers isn't there, a volunteer will always pass on a message and help me. They always make me feel welcome. They're a great bunch of people."

For Owen, volunteers are essential to the chapel's work. "One of my favourite images was when I came in one day and there was a man straight out of prison sitting with an 80-year-old grandma who was teaching him how to sew curtains," he recalls. "He was just getting public housing and they never come with curtains so he was sewing his own. That's what makes it so full of life and so unique. It's what makes our community work."

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“Not only do volunteers help support how we operate but they are also what makes us a community. They make not-for-profits unique in that we’re not just agencies running programs, we’re a community of people trying to build a stronger community. If it was just staff delivering good programs, you’re having great outcomes but not necessarily building community.”

Foodbank’s Luke Chesworth echoes this sentiment: “Our volunteers tell us that one of the main reasons they continue to volunteer is because of the social connection. They feel valued, they feel wanted and they’ve got friends that they’ve made. If they can’t volunteer it’s a real sense of loss for them. I had to speak to a few people who were really upset because they had to make the decision to pause volunteering [due to the pandemic]. There’s still a lot of them waiting to re-join the organisation.”

The pandemic has dealt a cruel blow to charities and their beloved volunteers. Charities engage 3.7 million volunteers, almost three times the amount of people they employ, while half of all charities operate solely with volunteer staff. During the COVID peak, almost two-thirds of this volunteer workforce disappeared overnight, with female volunteers and those over the age of 65 most affected. Foodbank lost half of their volunteers while Wayside Chapel stood down most of theirs. The good news: volunteers are slowly trickling back.

Another charity powered by the goodness of its volunteers is Sikh Volunteers Australia (SVA). Since 2014 their free food vans have quietly turned up to help during times of strife. Earlier this year they stationed themselves in fire-ravaged Gippsland in order to feed

both residents and fireys. They cooked food daily for the 3000 residents of Melbourne’s public housing towers who were unceremoniously put into “hard lockdown” in July. And throughout Melbourne’s own lengthy lockdown, they have home-delivered freshly made dahl, vegetable kormas and creamy mutter paneer – almost 210,000 free meals – to the elderly, the unemployed, single mums and health workers.

Jaswinder Singh began volunteering for SVA as soon as he arrived in Australia in 2014. One of nearly 260 volunteers, he expects to remain busy throughout December thanks to the charity’s recent announcement that deliveries of their free tiffin will continue through Christmas and until the end of the year.

“We couldn’t run without our volunteers,” explains Singh. “And the good thing is our volunteers are completely multicultural. We have volunteers from all sections, all religions, all communities of society. We are very proud of this.”

Listen to Singh speak about the many people SVA have assisted and you’ll hear the emotion in his voice. “It makes me feel very bad to think we are living in such a prosperous country but still we have people with empty stomachs,” he says, recalling an elderly lady who regularly came to collect meals for her unwell son and granddaughters before disappearing during the first lockdown in March. Singh hopes to see her again soon.

Then there is the one encounter that will stay with him forever. It was at the Bairnsdale Relief Centre during January’s bushfires, where the SVA team were handing out free meals. A young nurse, fresh from her shift at the local hospital approached him, having just learned her family home had succumbed to the fires, forcing her parents to seek refuge at the relief centre. “She came up to me and just hugged me and started crying. She wanted to say thank you because we had fed her parents, looked after them.” Singh pauses briefly, then adds: “Sometimes people don’t need food, they just need a shoulder to cry on.”

The pandemic-induced economic downturn has cast a shadow over Australia’s charity sector. A decrease in donations coupled with an increase in demand for services – especially with the winding back of JobSeeker payments – means that volunteers will be more important than ever, especially at Christmas. While there is some speculation as to how exactly people will celebrate this year, as Jon Owen says, “Whenever there is a need, love will always find a way.”

But perhaps Jaswinder Singh explains the magic of volunteers best: “When you do something good, society realises that something good is happening and that it is happening for the common good of all. People want to share that cause – people want to contribute – and that’s how a chain reaction happens. And when that happens, it is unstoppable.” ■

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