



# The Value in Volunteering

by Tracy Steele

Why do you volunteer? Do you volunteer because you know your help is needed? Do you do it to meet new people and form friendships? Perhaps you volunteer because you are passionate about giving back to your local community. Or maybe, you have a career goal in mind and you choose to strategically volunteer to gain needed skills for future paid employment. If you answered yes to any or all of these questions, you likely have realized that volunteering not only benefits the community but there are also significant personal gains from donating your time.

When I first began volunteering as a young adult and especially now as a military spouse, I answered yes to all of the reasons to volunteer *except* for strategically volunteering to gain skills. I think like many, I looked at volunteering as something 'feel-good' and not 'skill-worthy' as it was not employment that I needed to apply or interview for. No qualifications necessary to give back to the community! What I can offer now after a long career as an active volunteer is that I was so wrong!

My lifetime of volunteering has strengthened my resume AND my *network*, making me incredibly marketable for a position that landed in my lap. Newsflash! - I am not special! This should be the case for ANY person who dedicates their time to unpaid volunteer WORK. My story is an example of how one can be 'unemployed' from their profession for several years yet unknowingly acquire skills in new areas of expertise to then gain confidence and the ability to make a career change and land paid employment.

Trying to maintain my career as a Registered Nurse with the nomadic military lifestyle has proven too difficult to manage, however volunteering has repeatedly offered me flexible ways to engage with my community and find a new purpose and sense of fulfillment. I learned at an early age the importance of volunteering and giving back to the community through the example my mom provided. I have inherited her passion for making a difference in the community through volunteering and have used it to help cope with move-after-move as a military spouse.

The culminating time for me where it became glaringly obvious the professional benefits of volunteering was during my time in Okinawa, Japan and my work founding Beyond Volunteering. When I first arrived on island, I jumped right into volunteering to meet people and find a purpose for my time. I quickly signed up to



volunteer at the Marine Gift Shop, joined the Marine Officers' Spouses' Club - Okinawa (MOSCO) and helped with the PTO at my kids' middle school. These organizations and the roles I held grew my *network* of friends as well as my passion for how I wanted to spend my time. I began taking on more leadership roles and working closely with other military spouse volunteers who were equally passionate at doing great *work* as a volunteer. Unbeknownst to us, we were all acquiring marketable skills that can easily translate into the workforce!

Since living in Okinawa, I have become familiar with the term 'strategic volunteering' - using volunteer work to gain professional experience in a career field. At first, I did not feel this pertained to me since I personally chose my volunteer roles through where my heart led me and not specifically to acquire skills for employment. But little did I know that all along, I have been *purposefully* volunteering by choosing what I am passionate about and have gained *professional* skills in those areas. And guess what - if you volunteer, you are doing just the same!

My perspective on acquiring professional skills through volunteer work did not change over night, as I am a visual learner and needed to be convinced in writing - my resume. For me, this was the 'A-HA!' moment. The process of learning to put all of my professional experience that I have gained through volunteer work was at times daunting but the end result was one that even I didn't expect. To see my accomplishments, acquired skills and how the organizations have benefited from my service, in writing, on a professional resume, was what made me realize what I have been doing is professional-level work and this was the confidence booster that I needed. No resume gap for me anymore!

Having a current resume along with the confidence that I possess marketable skills positioned me to be able to jump on a paid opportunity that fell on my lap through my *network*. My volunteer experience is proving to be exactly what I need to be successful in my new paid position! And the greatest thing about how I gained this marketable experience is it was at no-cost to me, I made friends while doing it, and my community benefited!

The value in volunteering truly goes beyond just making a community better. Giving of your time strengthens your community and can enhance your marketable skills. The proof can be in your resume!