

## **Elizabeth Gowans - HMP Wormwood Scrubs Community Chaplaincy**

### ***Description of volunteering activity:***

We are teamed up with a prisoner whom we visit in prison for six months prior to release then mentor on the outside for a further 6 months

### ***Frequency of volunteering activity:***

Weekly or twice a month

### ***How long have you volunteered for, in this opportunity and/or others?***

HMP Wormwood Scrubs (males) six years; HMP Bronzefield (females: internal visits only) four years

### ***What do the beneficiaries get out of it?***

Non-judgmental friendship and support from persons with possibly more social credibility, know-how, objectivity and contacts

***What do you, the volunteer, get out of it?*** Keeping your eyes open, you try to carry people – on your back, over your shoulder, in your arms - through danger, fear, and confusion, and set them down safely. When it works well, it feels as if you are using your gifts/self in accordance with the Maker's instructions! Working with prisoners gives a deeper understanding of what makes us who we are and our mutual responsibility for each other, individually and collectively.

### ***Has volunteering had an impact on your life over and above your direct involvement with volunteering?***

The exposure makes you grateful for your ordinary place in the scheme of things.

### ***How would you sum up what being a volunteer means to you?***

It's a Work in Progress, like me!

### ***What is the best/worst thing about being a volunteer?***

The best is that I was brought up to help people so it feels right. There are two 'worst things'. Firstly, sometimes confronting the effects of damaged pasts twenty years too late. Secondly, knowing that their experiences, impoverishments and the structure of society in general are weighted 70% against their survival on the outside.

### ***What made you decide to volunteer?***

An ex-prison governor who was managing a Day Centre for the Homeless had been watching me cutting the hair of 'difficult' men. He said: 'You'd make a good prison visitor'.

### ***What was involved in becoming a volunteer?***

Security checks, security training, mentoring training.

### ***Do you think volunteering will have any effect on your career?***

Since I retired my career is volunteering! Mondays - women's prison; Tuesdays - Day Centre for Homeless People (cutting hair); Wednesdays - men's prison; Thursdays - Refugee Council West London (teaching English, organising outings etc); Fridays - visiting a care home for the Elderly as part of a team. These are afternoon slots. I also occasionally drive a council mini-bus for various groups.

### ***Any other information you would like to add?***

Volunteering gives the opportunity to meet remarkable, interesting, unique, intriguing, precious people and though sometimes stretching, is personally enriching. Everyone's doing it. Our local school kids run an after school IT class for retired people; the older students volunteer at children's camps. Both the Refugee Council and the Day Centre where I also volunteer have armies of volunteers without whom they could not offer their array of services. The Day Centre even has a Volunteer Waiting List! Though most places refund travel, some say the Bus Pass hours were relaxed to allow the early morning back-up. Getting involved and learning how much help is available to, for example, the homeless – and helping – eased my feelings of personal discomfort on passing them in the street. Though I didn't directly cause their situation, in some way we are all related. The Great Salt Shaker in the sky shook us all out on different patches – but we're part of the same mosaic and if God spares me, I'll keep on volunteering 'til the fat lady sings!