Student Volunteer Stories
STUDENT VOLUNTEER STORIES

This collection of short stories focuses on a range of different volunteer activities and programmes available to Victoria University of Wellington students on campus and in the wider community. We thank all of our students for their contributions and acknowledge that there are many more examples of civic engagement and community volunteering across Wellington and beyond, of which our students can be proud of their involvement.

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When I first arrived at Victoria University in March 2017 from India, I didn’t know anyone. I was on the lookout for a community to join that I was both passionate about and could help me meet new people, and the Victoria Fruit and Vegetable Co-operative caught my eye.

The Victoria Fruit and Vegetable Co-operative distributes fresh and affordable produce across the University’s campuses each week, contributing to a healthy food environment for staff and students, and aligning with Victoria University’s status as a health-promoting university. The Co-operative could not function without the support of its volunteers, who help collect, pack and distribute orders to the Co-operative’s members.

Volunteering is not a job that you have to do. It’s something that you are so passionate about that you want to do it. I joined the Victoria Fruit and Vegetable Co-operative as a volunteer because I understand the important role fresh fruit and vegetables play in health and wellbeing, and the Co-operative makes healthy food accessible to our community. In simple words, I believe in what the Co-operative stands for.

My first volunteer role was as a packer. Fruit and vegetable orders are packed up for collection every Thursday, and there are multiple stages to this weekly pack out—we unload the produce from the delivery trucks, set up the tables, prepare the correct number of bags for the orders, and pack all of the orders, ready for collection by our Co-operative members. The pack out reminds me of a movie in which Santa’s elves in the North Pole worked together to pack Christmas gifts for children. There’s a real sense of excitement as we work together as a team, enjoying ourselves throughout the process. We play music, we chat. We are one big community.

After some time as a packer, I became the pack out coordinator. I would weigh the produce and make sure what we packed matched the number of orders received for each campus. I currently prepare the order lists for each campus and manage our database.

I’ve never been daunted by the increased responsibility, due to the support of the Victoria Fruit and Vegetable Co-operative organiser and Wellness Nurse at Mauri Ora, Catherine Nelson. Catherine is always there when I need support or guidance, and she is both my friend and mentor. I’ve made a few mistakes, but due to the Co-operative’s support, I’ve never lost confidence in myself.

There are so many ways to be involved in the Co-operative. I do miss being a part of the pack out, but I’m glad to still be a part of the community. Volunteering for the Co-operative also helps me gain points for the Victoria Plus Award, which is an added bonus.
Disability Services’ Vic Volunteer Assistant Walker, Jessica Finley, was motivated to volunteer because she wanted to become more involved in the Victoria University community outside of her classes. Additionally, she finds being part of Disability Services an incredibly fun and rewarding way to volunteer, meet new people and help out other students.

“I have personally grown up around people with disabilities, so for me, I’ve never thought of treating those with disabilities differently. Disability has such a huge range, and it is so important to ask if someone needs a hand rather than just making assumptions. At the end of the day, we are all people who all deserve respect.”

Jessica is studying Spanish and International Relations with a minor in Education. She is one of around 150 Vic Volunteers who supplement the efforts of paid staff at Disability Services to ensure students with disabilities can fully access their education.

As a Vic Volunteer Assistant Walker, Jessica walks with students between their lectures to make sure people don’t bump into them, as well as holding open heavy doors and providing physical support if a student needs it when walking.

Jessica enjoys being able to build relationships with students and the friendships that can come out of the role. “On the way to lectures, we often have good chats about university, what we got up to in the weekends and our families.”

Jessica highly recommends getting involved in a role such as Assistant Walking, as “even having half an hour spare each week makes a huge difference and it is such a great experience. Disability Services and Vic Volunteers are a great way to start volunteering, as it’s all on campus and can fit around your schedule.”

Disability Services welcomes student and staff volunteers to get in touch for more information on volunteer opportunities that are available.
The Student Wellbeing Awareness Team (SWAT) is a team of students who are passionate about wellbeing. They are a diverse, compassionate and non-judgemental group that encourages collaboration between students. Their goal is to empower students to have control over their own health by raising awareness and providing education about health and wellbeing.

SWAT is funded by Mauri Ora’s Student Counselling, as part of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Objectives and Okanagan Charter principles to increase connectedness and engagement among students. SWAT has three casual employees and a group of volunteers linked in with the Victoria Plus Programme, facilitated by Victoria’s Careers and Employment team.

“From a leader’s perspective, I believe that SWAT provides a great opportunity for students to connect and make friends with other like-minded students who share the same passion for having a positive impact on the University community. I believe that SWAT not only gives volunteers important real-world skills but also friendships and a supportive and non-judgemental community,” says Bua Raphiphathana, a SWAT Leader in 2018.

SWAT follows the principle of flexible volunteerism, in which students choose to be involved in ways that suit them. Volunteering for SWAT provides the opportunity for students to develop real-world skills in health promotion. Through group meetings, and planning and organising events, students get to practice and hone their communication, leadership, team work and public speaking skills, which are all important transferrable skills to take to the workplace.

Volunteering for SWAT helps students gain confidence, feel good, develop people skills and promote positive wellbeing for students at Victoria, and provides a space for discussion around wellbeing and mental health. SWAT meets weekly to hang out and chat about key wellbeing issues on campus, and also organises social events for volunteers. They brainstorm activities, then coordinate and implement them on campus to improve the wellbeing of fellow students, and work is evaluated using the Plan Do Study Act model.

SWAT’s recent initiatives include Pink Shirt Day, Mental Health Awareness Week, Peer Support Groups, submission and feedback on proposed policy and service changes, and the annual Wellbeing Symposium.
STUDENT VOLUNTEERS RECOGNISED THROUGH VICTORIA PLUS

VICTORIA PLUS PROGRAMME
STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

“The Victoria Plus Programme facilitated my involvement in the wider community and enabled me to accomplish things I didn’t know I was capable of. I have gained confidence in my own ability and have had many rewarding and humbling experiences,” says Sarah-Jane Christensen, an arts and law student.

It is these extracurricular experiences that unite students on the Victoria Plus Programme. They all have a common goal—to give back to their local community by supporting fellow students and stepping up to leadership positions on campus and in the Wellington region. During the past year, students volunteered with over 70 not-for-profit community organisations, including environmental, animal welfare, charities, festivals, education, youth and people in need. They also supported their faculties and many student services, clubs and representative groups that rely on the support of volunteers. Volunteering forms a significant part of the Victoria Plus Programme, which is recognised by the University on students’ academic transcripts at either Certificate or Award level.

Students appreciate the opportunity to volunteer and take on student leadership roles, as well as the networking and skill-building opportunities. “The skills and opportunities I’ve taken from this programme are invaluable. I’ve taken up leadership roles that I otherwise may not have even considered. These roles allowed me to step outside of my comfort zone and find out what I am really capable of,” says Anjela Frost, an arts student.

Commerce student Alan Ng feels that by participating in workshops and volunteering activities, he now understands the importance of personal development. “My experience in the Victoria Plus Programme has been adventurous and challenging. I have grown in confidence and improved my communication, time management, problem solving and leadership skills, and had the opportunity to network with like-minded students.”

The Victoria Plus Programme allows students to shape their programme to suit their own schedule, studies and interests. Students choose their volunteering roles, and they value the opportunity to make a positive impact on the lives of others, as well as their own. Active participation in the programme continues to grow and Victoria has recognised over 370 full Award recipients. The Victoria Plus Programme inspires many students to continuing giving back to others alongside their graduate careers.
FROM BUDDY TO BUDDY

VICTORIA INTERNATIONAL BUDDY PROGRAMME (IBP)
EVANS TAN | INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BUDDY

The Victoria International Buddy Programme (IBP) connects students from around the world and helps new international students at Victoria University to settle into life in a new country and culture.

Through the programme, current Victoria students are paired with new international students at the beginning of each trimester to provide both social and cultural support, and to hopefully find a good friend in the process. It’s a great chance for students to share their knowledge about Kiwi culture and help someone find their feet both in Wellington and on campus.

Current buddy, Evans Tan, a second-year international student majoring in Education and Psychology, found that having a buddy through the IBP helped him settle in to life in Wellington and meet new people, and now he’s returning the favour.

“Setting foot in a new country was never going to be easy. As I’d never been to New Zealand before, I had a lot of questions—‘What do I need to bring? What do I need to wear?’ (I had no clue about the weather). Nevertheless, having a buddy helped ease my anxiety. During our exchange of emails before I arrived, my buddy was able to answer my questions and help me to prepare for my trip to New Zealand. When I arrived, I was able to meet other new international students through activities organised through the IBP, which was a highlight of the programme.

“After Trimester One, I decided to become a buddy, as I realised how much of a difference having a buddy made for me. I also really enjoyed interacting with other international students and learning about different countries and cultures, and broadening my world view. I was also able to forge good friendships with these students and share my own culture too.

“Being a buddy was really fun because it allowed me to help and advise my buddy, Timme. I enjoy helping people and I really enjoyed spending time with Timme and showing him around Wellington. Most importantly, I enjoyed his company! The IBP has given me the opportunity to see the world through different people and our interactions. Not only have I gained new perspectives, but I’ve also enjoyed myself through this experience. Despite having to take time off from my busy study schedule, it was really enjoyable and fulfilling, and I’d highly recommend this programme to anyone who is interested in making new international friends.”
Victoria University’s Halls-of-Residence offer a range of volunteering opportunities to their residents across the academic year.

Tyler Hunter, a film student and current resident at Helen Lowry Hall, took part in these volunteering opportunities with her fellow residents and found it a rewarding experience.

“Last year, myself and six others residents from my hall had the opportunity to volunteer with Ronald McDonald House here in Wellington. We were able to visit the Wellington House and meet the people who helped run it. They are amazing people who dedicate their days to making things more comfortable for families who have had to alter their entire lifestyle.

“The organisation aims to help out families who have children, brothers or sisters that have illnesses in which they are required to be hospitalised for long periods of time. The Ronald McDonald Houses create a home away from home for these families.

“During our time at the Wellington House, we were able to look through the pantry and create a menu for a communal meal to serve to the families living there. They supplied all the facilities for us to make a meal, as well and most of the food to go it with, which is donated by local supermarkets. They were extremely hospitable and grateful to have us and for our enthusiasm to help out.

“Once we had made a bulk meal for around 40–50 people, we were able to sit down and enjoy the meal with the families. We got to talk to them all and further understand the situations they are in. This helped us understand how a little can go a long way, and how rewarding it is to help those who are in difficult situations and who may not have the time or resources to provide for themselves.

“The experience opened my eyes to just how rewarding volunteering can be, and I’ve taken as many volunteering opportunities as possible since. It was an incredible experience, and we look forward to doing it again this year.”
ACTIVATING GLOBAL CITIZENS AND LEADERS

VICTORIA INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME (VILP) STUDENT VOLUNTEERS

Volunteering comes under the experiential activities component of the Victoria International Leadership Programme (VILP), encouraging students to participate actively as global citizens in international leadership and civic engagement. Students cross ethnic and cultural boundaries, engaging with persons or groups who possess a cultural viewpoint different from their own, and in effect, learn more about intercultural communication, global citizenship and leadership in an international context.

Tala Skeens, a law and arts student, thinks that VILP should be part of all students education in today’s global society. “VILP ensured that my university experience was well rounded and involved more than just attending lectures and learning the requisite information. VILP has helped round me into a global citizen and a well-informed, educated member of Victoria University and society.”

Julia Noh, who graduated with a Master of International Relations, says VILP grew her global leadership skills. “In terms of the experiential activities, the main activity that impacted me was teaching English to a refugee. I had a TESOL certificate, but had never applied it. I was given a few days of training and was then matched up with my English student. She was a beginner to intermediate English speaker and it challenged me to break the cultural barriers, adapt to the situation and have a better understanding of other people around the world. We did 12 sessions all together, and I could really see her growing every week as I led her through it. I discovered that to be a good teacher, I needed an open mind and patience, which are important qualities necessary for a global leader.”

Jonothan Burnell, who graduated with a Bachelor of Arts, enjoyed the opportunities VILP provided to experience other cultures. “I was an ELTO volunteer and helped two government officials from Myanmar and Laos learn English, and settle into New Zealand during their stay here. I thoroughly enjoyed learning about their culture and doing a number of activities with them. They helped me broaden my horizons and learn to respect other cultures and the subtle differences that not only differentiate us but bind us together as well.”

Hayley Russell, who graduated with a Bachelor of Music and Bachelor of Science, says that, “... through volunteering at the Diwali Festival, I learned so much about India and the roots of their traditions, and gained insight into their everyday life and culture. By volunteering at the Conversation Club for a trimester, I heard about all facets of life in places all over the world. These experiences made me value my home country, New Zealand, and made me reflect on my culture ... it made me yearn to travel more, learn more and experience more.”
Class Representatives act as a bridge between academics and students, and work with the Victoria University of Wellington Students’ Association (VUWSA) Academic team on any academic issues that arise in their course. Class Reps are not note takers or class life coaches. Their role is to facilitate feedback about the course by communicating regularly with other students and the course coordinator.

Class Reps are elected by students by the third week of class each trimester. Being a Class Rep requires a weekly commitment from the student, and this leadership role may be approved (on a case-by-case basis) to count towards the Victoria Plus Programme and the Victoria International Leadership Programme (VILP).

Class Rep Alex M Kenny, who studies English, History, Philosophy and Sociology, says her role has provided new opportunities to establish connections with staff and students.

“Beyond the connections I’ve made with students that I otherwise wouldn’t have talked to, I’ve been able to form a beneficial relationship with our lecturer, and this relationship helps me not only understand our course content better but may lead to a reference after graduation.

Another reason that I enjoy my role as Class Rep is that I enjoy public speaking, and the opportunity to practise this skill will help me with my future. I find it particularly rewarding to be a friendly face that students can approach for help—I’ve already received multiple messages from my peers regarding assignments and tests, and support with class notes and lecture recordings. In a nut shell, being a Class Rep has many perks, and I have enjoyed the experience so far.”

Liam Bewley, who is the Class Rep for undergraduate students studying a Bachelor of Music in Classical Performance, says his role as Class Rep will help establish himself within the New Zealand School of Music —Te Kōkī.

“I have really enjoyed living in Wellington for the last month, as it has opened my eyes to the many different opportunities that I can participate in. I like to involve myself in any musical experience that comes my way, and I’m really looking forward to the many ways I can interact with my peers and help them across the year.”
Many Victoria University students spend their spare time volunteering to support organisations in the wider community, supplementing their studies with experiences that allow them to practise their skills and learning.

Alena Grubinka, who is studying Psychology, volunteers for Samaritans New Zealand, an organisation who provides a 24/7 telephone counselling service for anyone who is experiencing a difficult time or is feeling lonely, depressed or suicidal. Alena's time volunteering for Samaritans New Zealand has given her practical experience and the opportunity to help others using her skill set.

“My time as a volunteer at Samaritans New Zealand has been great. At university, I learned the theory of clinical psychology, but through my volunteering role, I’ve gotten practical experience conversing with people who need support, practising both how to enter and end the conversation and how to switch over to another topic—all important skills when going into a career in Clinical Psychology. I gained experience talking to people about their problems and helping them to see these problems from another perspective and to think positively about what their options might be.

My tutor was really supportive—she would sit with me when I was on a call and write down ideas of what to say if I was having trouble.

“Volunteering for Samaritans New Zealand is a great first practical experience for students, because the person is not sitting right in front of you and you can remain anonymous. It’s also easier for the caller, having that confidentiality to talk to someone about their problems. I learned how to ask open-ended questions and talking about suicide as well, which can be challenging. But it is important to become comfortable asking these questions.

“I’ve had people ring back after a call to thank me for helping them. It’s an amazing feeling to know that you’ve helped a person in that way.”

When Alena leaves Samaritans New Zealand, she will spend some time travelling around the South Island with friends, before returning to Germany to begin a master’s in clinical psychology at the German Armed Forces University in Munich.
GirlGuiding New Zealand provides opportunities for girls and young women to reach their full potential and make a difference in the world.

Current GirlGuiding New Zealand volunteer, Ruby Sands, who studies Political Science and International Relations, has been given the opportunity to develop her confidence and leadership skills, and meet new people in the process.

“GirlGuiding has been around for 110 years, and it remains a revolutionary organisation supporting girls and their leaders to develop their potential and challenge themselves in a supportive environment.

“I’ve been involved in GirlGuiding New Zealand since I moved to Wellington, and it has been a great way for me to make friends in a new city and be active in the community. Around Wellington, girls aged 5-17 meet once a week during term time in Guide Units, according to their age. I began as a leader in a Guide Unit in Kelburn. This was a rewarding role, as I could see the girls developing skills through our different activities. As my own confidence grew, I was able to lead more activities myself and develop my own leadership skills.

“My favourite activity was when we went for a sleepover at Wellington Zoo, where the girls learned about conservation, how to protect endangered species and were even given the opportunity to help feed the animals. It’s an experience I’ll never forget.

“One of my personal highlights was attending the High-Level Political Forum at the United Nations in 2017 as part of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts. This opportunity was made possible through GirlGuiding’s consultative status with the United Nations. I was also able to advocate to World Leaders on the Sustainable Development Goals and meet with the New Zealand Ambassador to the United Nations in New York. These amazing experiences also contribute towards my Victoria International Leadership Programme (VILP).

“Every new leader is assigned a mentor. My mentor provided guidance when I was new to my Guide Unit, and she has continued to support me in developing my leadership skills and challenging myself to take on different roles within GirlGuiding New Zealand. I now coordinate the Young Leaders in the Wellington Region, supporting new leaders and ensuring they feel comfortable in their roles.

“GirlGuiding New Zealand need new volunteers to get involved so it can continue to run programmes for years to come. There are many different ways to be involved. You can make a weekly commitment to a Guide Unit, or you can volunteer on a casual basis. You can also help coordinate other volunteers or offer a particular skill set you’re interested in.”
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication features only a small number of volunteer stories from our students. We acknowledge the hundreds of different services and organisations both on and off campus not mentioned in this booklet, who work with Victoria University’s student volunteers to deliver positive changes in the wider community. There are many more opportunities for students to get involved, a number of which are also available through CareerHub, the Victoria Plus Programme and the Victoria International Leadership Programme.

This collection of stories was made possible by the generous students and staff who wrote for this publication, and we would like to give our sincere thanks to them for sharing their stories.

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