

One thing that I really appreciate about my roles as Mayor and MP is meeting so many of the selfless volunteers who contribute so much to our community.

There are so many ways that people contribute to our community, through organisations like Meals on Wheels, Landcare, school canteens, sporting clubs and many “invisible” ways.

This year was the 20th annual Clean Up Australia day and once again there was a tremendous turnout by people keen to contribute some effort to a good cause.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service has twice-yearly volunteer bush regeneration days at Pulbah Island. This typically attracts around 70 people for the morning’s work – including a free morning tea. The project has made great progress at removing weeds from the island.

There is still a great need for contributing to traditional organisations, but the nature of volunteering has changed for many people. The Centre for Volunteering has found that over 20% of volunteers are seeking job skills and 15% of people are interested in short-term opportunities. Approximately 20% of new volunteers use the Internet to find a “host” organisation.

A growing difficulty being found by some organisations is the more complicated legal issues facing volunteer groups as well as new responsibilities, such as providing training for volunteers.

It’s a well known saying that “time is money,” so I encourage readers to think about the real value of contributing volunteer time to any deserving cause. Our communities would be very much poorer without the many volunteers operating in a wide range of areas of need. While I know that they don’t seek our gratitude, they greatly deserve it.

Thanks to All Volunteers – Past, Present and Future

*Don't miss the chance to help where you can, says **Greg Piper***

Volunteers in our community improve the lives of many people and we can all feel indebted for the value they add to society.

In Lake Macquarie there are hundreds of groups that can only work because of the volunteer effort that goes into running them.

It's not possible to name all the groups, or probably to even know how many there really are. In mentioning a few I acknowledge that there are too many to name.

The 2006 census found that 34% of Australians over 18 participated in voluntary work, contributing 713 million hours per year.

The cost for governments in providing that many hours of service would be prohibitive. Without volunteers a lot of good work would not be done. Many volunteer efforts require coordination and guidance for the participants. This is where there is clearly a role for governments in funding the employment of coordinators and I recently raised this issue at the Australian Council of Local Government forum with the Commonwealth Government in Canberra.

Some groups pursue a particular interest such as Landcare, but others have a purely compassionate motivation, such as Meals on Wheels.

I've recently been able to use my role as Member for Lake Macquarie to support volunteer groups wanting to establish a Catalina Museum at Rathmines, a steam railway at Toronto and a Westlake branch of Sailability. Sadly I've also had to support Lake Macquarie Landcare as it recovers from the senseless arson attack on its headquarters. It's when you consider the antisocial and indifferent behaviour of some people that you can really appreciate the efforts of our volunteers. I really believe that, on balance, people are motivated towards doing good things and feel some sense of satisfaction. There can be intrinsic rewards in volunteering, but they also deserve acknowledgement and thanks.

Of course, there will be many volunteers whose results are invisible to most of us. People can give their time by helping the Red Cross with daily phone calls to elderly people living alone. It's also possible to do important volunteer work in an informal way, by things as simple as stopping to talk to elderly people in your own street.

There is a common view that charity means giving money to a good cause. This is part of the generous response of our community but we also need to remember that giving time can be just as important.

So, to all the helpers at school canteens, all the drivers for Meals on Wheels and all the service clubs and individuals who help charities, I say "Thank you and keep it up!" To everyone who sees an opportunity to help in their own neighbourhood, I say "Don't miss the chance to help where you can."

Greg Piper, Mayor of Lake Macquarie and Member for Lake Macquarie.