

WHEN IS A
VOLUNTEER NOT A
VOLUNTEER?

Unpaid work is seen by many to be perfectly reasonable in certain circumstances but, as Kerry Smith has found, real life situations don't always fit neatly into official definitions. She's found an alternative nomenclature for her professional volunteering activities.

On ALIA's website, the Association's *Statement on Voluntary Work in Library and Information Services* states that 'ALIA emphasises that the efficient collection, organisation and dissemination of information requires a highly-trained, paid library and information services workforce with increasingly sophisticated skills'. The Statement strongly affirms the requirement that volunteer labour must not replace 'appropriately trained and paid staff'.

And yet most of us know that such is not the case with the use of some volunteers in our libraries today. So my jaundiced view of the use of volunteers in Australian libraries where a professional qualification is required remains.

So why my interest now? Since I've retired as an academic I still dabble in the research environment, professional issues, and a few other things including family, but my main activity at the moment is with a community native flora group in WA that works tirelessly to conserve and preserve Western Australia's wonderful native flora.

When I saw that the group's library had been shoved away in a corner of their premises with no-one to look after it, I asked why. The group had used the volunteer services of interested members to care for it over many years, but these dear folk had grown older and did not have the energy or capacity to continue.

So would I volunteer to get it going again? I did. I did not have the expertise to assist in botanical issues, tasks that are undertaken by a wonderful crew of volunteers, so I dabbled

with the library on weekends while still an academic. How wonderful it was to re-learn simple UDC, to set up a simple database so that we could at least locate a title, to read and investigate botanical debate and history, to reacquaint myself with collection issues I'd addressed when I worked in the mining and petroleum industries before I became an academic.

I prefer to let people know that I am working for the group in a pro bono capacity. If lawyers can do this, then why shouldn't we?

When I visited the Pro Bono Resource Centre website (www.nationalprobono.org.au) I found this definition: 'Pro bono comes from the Latin phrase 'pro bono publico' which means for the public good. In the legal context it generally means the provision of legal services on a free or significantly reduced fee basis.'

The site offers a series of clarifications for this general definition, mainly for the legal fraternity, yet the issues arise for our profession as well. They include working without expectation of a fee or possibly at a reduced fee, the provision of financial or in-kind assistance and the provision of services for non-profit organisations working on behalf of members of the community who are disadvantaged or marginalised, or which work for the public good and work on public interest matters, these being matters of broad community concern which would not otherwise be pursued. The clarifications also exclude speculative work where the underlying motive is commercial gain.

Researchers like Murdock, writing in the *Handbook of Political Economy of Communications*, have spent a lot of time debating this issue in the realm of economics, and assert that

libraries and other 'collective cultural resources' are shared physical commons intended to share use and advance the common good. So libraries are right up there in the public good sphere.

And I would suggest so are many community organisations, including the one I work with, particularly if we follow Murdock's analogies and align with advancing the common good. I am persuaded that 'pro bono work' under such circumstances sounds much more professional and, to be honest, the library work that I do is of a very professional nature.

But did I bite the ALIA policy bullet when I then found myself at a Western Australian government agency for a wildflower meeting and one of my wildflower groupies said: 'Kerry why don't you pop up to the library, we hear they need help'?

I'd resisted this for some time, but wandered up to have a chat. Yes, they did need help and no I was not going to take on any task that a paid professional should and could do as part of the running of the service, nor was that expected of me.

But what about their collection of mainly unmarked photos and slides from long retired staff that had been dumped on the library some time ago during a forced amalgamation? Was it worth looking at? Was it worth keeping? Who on the staff would have the knowledge, experience and time to spend hours trying to contact the photographers, should they still be alive, and try and work on the collection?

Some of my library skills did come into play as I catalogued the named slides, but it was the hundreds of unmarked slides in little yellow Kodak boxes, and the many unmarked photos that were the challenge. I started the long process of grouping the boxes and photos under possible photographer names, often by matching handwriting, thinking of ways to easily reproduce images of the pictures to send to the possible photographers, and then trying to locate these people.

If I revisit the definition of pro bono in this context, can I satisfy myself that the work that I was doing was for the public good? Yes, it is a grey professional area, though I am reassured that the professionals at the library thought enough about this collection to keep it, and try and have it worked on rather than toss it on day one.

They protected it just in case, one day, they might find the time to start the work, or perhaps someone might walk through the door. Spending endless hours trying to establish the provenance of such a collection, all the while knowing that some of it might end up in the bin, can be pretty devastating. But the collection tells a story and perhaps, one day, interest in the history of our conservation and forestry work might revitalise. I know just the place where such an interest might be sated, for the public good.

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