

Something for nothing

Offering your services for free can be richly rewarding, writes **Sue White**.

Yianni Zinonos (pictured) knows all too well how many people are keen to break into television. He used to be one of them, until his willingness to work as a volunteer put him squarely in front of the camera. "I had studied acting and I wanted to improve my communication skills, so I started doing a weekly segment on community television eight years ago," he says. "When TVS offered me my own cooking show I was thrilled."

Zinonos says the voluntary nature of putting together *Yianni's City Life* doesn't make it less intense: "We do 26 shows a year; it's full on. But I've learnt things I never would have at a college or university. It's a fantastic training ground for people wanting to get into the industry."

Although everything from lighting and sound to hair and make-up is done by volunteers, Zinonos says the program offers unpaid workers more than a chance to build technical skills.

"Something special happens with volunteer work in community organisations," he says. "There is an enormous amount of social goodwill created when people come together like this."

The chief executive of NSW's Centre for Volunteering, Lynnie Dalton, says it's common for volunteering to pay off in unexpected ways. "The most common motivation is to give back, but actually studies show people who volunteer live longer and are happier," she says.

Dalton says there are opportunities for everyone and she believes that as volunteering becomes more professional it's getting easier to ensure the



Photo: Tamera Dean

experience remains a positive one. "We insist on a job description, and then the person self selects," she says. "It's vital that volunteers enjoy what they're doing."

At least 35 per cent of Australians formally volunteer, with many choosing to donate their professional skills as a way of giving back. About six months ago, James Porrovecchio approached children's cancer charity RedKite and offered his skills as a graphic designer. "At 35, I'm probably at an age where I feel it's good to do something for someone else," he says. "I had some extra time and thought that rather

than doing less I would do some volunteer work instead."

Porrovecchio says that while he was impressed by the work RedKite does for children and families, its professional approach was a good fit for him. "I was attracted by their commitment to good design and strong branding, which isn't always the case with non-profits," he says.

"I treat them like a client and I expect to deliver them top-quality work. Sometimes it can be difficult to juggle with my paid work but they are sensitive to that. I find it really rewarding and am sure I get just as much out of it as they do."

Jessica van Netten, 20, began volunteering at Biraban Public School because she had some spare time to offer her computing skills and, although she initially volunteered simply to help out, the experience ultimately impacted her career choices. "I was studying psychology at University but I've decided to switch to teaching next year," she says. "It was the volunteering that helped me realise this was something I'd like to do."

The current financial climate may have heightened interest in volunteering but the organisations who depend on volunteers look for similar qualities in their team members. Reliability is as highly valued as in paid roles and most organisations stress volunteers should make sure they can juggle volunteering with their regular commitments: "We rely on our volunteers, so we need people to show up each week and on time," Oxfam's National Volunteer Coordinator, Lucy Delahey, says. "Volunteers are integral to our work but we also want them to be connected to the values of the agency, so we ask people 'why' they want to volunteer with us."

Zinonos believes volunteering is the new hobby of the 21st century and says those unsure about it will soon feel its benefits. "Everyone is programmed into thinking there is something wrong if you're doing something for free but people need to realise that volunteering is good for the soul," he says.

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