

Volunteer lives - Caroline Sanderson – West Dean Gardens and Canine Partners

After working in various roles in the corporate world for 37 years, Caroline Sanderson wanted to change her life. She had become a workaholic and realised that, although she had travelled widely, she had only seen airports, hotels and offices. 'Fortunately a voluntary redundancy offer came up in 2016 and I jumped at the chance,' Caroline explains. 'At the time I wasn't aware that accepting voluntary redundancy would be the first step on my volunteering journey.'

A driven individual and needing to keep occupied, she set up her own business consulting company, working two days a week. However, she wanted, and needed, to do more. 'We had bought a house in Felpham and the garden had not been touched for 20 years,' she says. 'It needed lots of attention but I had no knowledge of gardening so I took myself off to Brinsbury College to study RHS Level 2.' To further her knowledge and to help fill her free time, a friend suggested that she volunteer at the renowned West Dean Gardens. 'I was lucky to get a volunteer position in June 2016 and have been there ever since,' Caroline comments. 'I had never realised how important a volunteer is to help charities exist as they cannot survive with paid staff alone. For me it is a win-win scenario. I provide an extra pair of hands and in return I learn more about gardening, get great exercise and meet lovely colleagues and members of the public.'

Caroline's first love is animals and she realised that she had a wealth of business skills that could be of use to charities. One of her fellow West Dean volunteers suggested that she go to a Canine Partners Information Day at their Southern Centre. 'I was so moved to see how the dogs transformed physically disabled people's lives, giving them independence, stimulation and so much more that I signed up to volunteer there and then,' she says.

Her roles within Canine Partners range from being an occasional fosterer for dogs during their Advanced Training period to walking partners' dogs on the beach or in woods to give the dogs some well-deserved downtime (as many places are not accessible for wheelchair users). Caroline also utilises those business skills to work with the Head of Strategic Projects on many initiatives. 'I was using my brain and getting the benefits of exercise and the therapy of playing with dogs,' she explains. 'I am not yet in a position of having my own dog so helping a charity providing an assistance dog gives me all the benefits. And furthermore, I have been able to assist some of the partners with their gardens.'

From this activity, Caroline has gained an awareness and understanding of the need for better provision of access in the environment. Currently she is championing this for Bognor and the surrounding area. 'It's tragic that people with pushchairs or wheelchairs or who are sight challenged or just slightly unsteady on their feet can't get to the sea.'

She approached VAAC as she had seen a number of their adverts in the Bognor Observer and thought what an excellent idea it was to support multiple charities and help connect people like herself to roles that could make a difference. She met Jackie Sumner, the CEO, and is now working with her as an ambassador for accessibility and is hoping to make a positive difference to others.

'I have a busy life with all my volunteering, but it keeps me energised, plus I am learning so much about how the charity sector works and how important volunteers are to its success. You also get to meet wonderful people and it's far better than sitting in front of the TV.'

Interview by Marcus Waring. Based in West Sussex, Marcus has worked as a travel and lifestyle journalist, editor and managing editor since 2000, with work ranging from travel features for national newspapers and magazines to running editorial teams and projects. www.marcuswaring.com.