

## **Volunteer Lives - Emily Behan – Aldingbourne Trust, Bognor Makerspace and VAAC**

‘Volunteering to me is the glue of the local community,’ says Emily Behan, 24 years old and with an academic background in psychology. She currently works for Aldingbourne Trust (after volunteering for them), supporting adults with autism and or learning disabilities, and volunteers for two other local organisations, the Bognor Makerspace and VAAC.

‘In 2019 I got involved with Aldingbourne Trust’s autism and learning disability-friendly club nights, called Living Out Loud, which aim to provide a full-on club night experience without compromising the music and atmosphere,’ she explains. ‘Having autism and ADHD myself, the minute I heard of the events I knew I had to be involved.’

However, the Bognor Makerspace chose her, she believes. ‘It came to me at a time when I so desperately needed it and I have never looked back,’ she says. ‘I attended a three-week theatre course there in July 2021. At this time I was in a very dark place mentally and felt like a shell of a person. I remember thinking I would never make it through it, let alone enjoy it, but I couldn’t have been more wrong.’

She found the course challenging but also a major turning point in her life. ‘I learned new skills, gained confidence, made friends and realised that my life had value. When the course ended I felt devastated to be leaving. At this point I was told that there was the opportunity to volunteer with them and I said yes without hesitation.’

Emily volunteered with VAAC in November 2022, helping with a ‘Christmas on a budget’ event. In 2023 VAAC asked her to take part in one of their newer projects promoting wellbeing as a community connector. Emily says VAAC has been helpful in her volunteering journey. ‘They have been amazing at supporting me,’ she comments. ‘They have provided me with great opportunities, been there to offer support and answer any questions I may have and offered me resources and training opportunities to enhance my skills and knowledge.’

Volunteering has also equipped Emily with new skills and a changed outlook. ‘It allows me to gain a broader perspective on life and to work with diverse groups of people,’ she says. ‘It has helped to develop my communication and interpersonal skills, it’s helped me to work effectively in a team, adapt to different situations and to solve problems creatively.’

She thinks that volunteering also really benefits the local community. ‘It allows people to give back and enhance their local area,’ she comments. ‘You don’t need to be rich or powerful to make change - the only things you need are a couple of hours of free time, a skill you can share and a willingness to make a difference, no matter how small that difference is.’

Another positive uplift has been on Emily’s health. ‘Volunteering has greatly improved my mental wellbeing, contributing to the community has given me a huge sense of purpose and fulfilment and it has also helped me to build a strong support network and to form social connections. The sense of belonging has significantly reduced my feelings of loneliness and social isolation. It has helped me to keep more active and to maintain a healthier lifestyle on the whole.’

Emily continues to volunteer because she can see the difference it makes. ‘A couple of hours out of my week means so much to the organisations I volunteer for and the people they support,’ she says. ‘Not only does it benefit others, but it benefits me hugely too. Most importantly, it has helped me to see the good in the world and the beauty in the everyday.’

*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.*

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