
Big Picture, Small Picture

The 2000 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games Volunteer Experience – a personal perspective

JO FAIRBAIRN

THE OLYMPIC TORCH RELAY

When managing a successful Volunteer Program, there are important strategies for success. One such strategy is to include photographs of volunteers at work (with permission), when describing a volunteer project. Faces tell the story and the reason most projects are successful is the people in them. The Olympic Torch Relay was an absolute highlight for the majority of Australians. The media brought it into our homes and places of work. The faces of each of the Olympic Torch Runners were published in daily newspapers in each state. A wonderful air of excitement was created leading up to the Olympic games.

We all enjoyed seeing the famous people, running with the Olympic Torch, but it was the average people, the true 'Aussies' who won our hearts. The reaction of Australia to the Olympic Torch phenomenon made us all proud. Eleven thousand people carried the Olympic Torch and willingly volunteered to do so, after being nominated by their community. The Olympic Torch Relay was an outstanding success. Where people ran, was in some cases many hours drive from their local community. No one seemed to mind as it was a chance of a lifetime.

Communities embraced these volunteers as celebrities and communities came together in a way not seen before. In one small rural community farmers lined the path with an avenue of tractors as a symbol of work, welcome and community. The volunteers were well prepared for this event by the Sydney Organising Committee

for the Olympic and Paralympic Games (SOCOG) and one of the most significant aspects of the training, for some volunteers, was an essay written by a previous Torch Relay Volunteer. It prepared all 'for the mixed emotions the runners may experience on this wonderful journey'.

THE 2000 OLYMPIC AND PARALYMPIC GAMES – SYDNEY AUSTRALIA

In 1998, David Brettell, Project Manager Volunteer Services SOCOG, presented his brief, which was to recruit fifty thousand volunteers around Australia. This was a huge task and those who got to know David Brettell and his team had no doubt they would achieve their goal.

Volunteers had already been assisting SOCOG in many ways for four years before the Olympics. The process of applying to be a volunteer included meeting paid staff and other volunteers. There was a sense of excitement, a warm welcome, and a smile for all. Communication was clear and always documented. Interviews were held both in Sydney and volunteers' home states. Training was offered both interstate and in Sydney. The training was generally of a high standard and was presented enthusiastically. Volunteers were highly valued from the beginning.

People chose to volunteer *en masse*. Each volunteer knew that if they were travelling from interstate or overseas they were expected to pay their own transport and accommodation costs. It worked.

Sydney people were fantastic about taking people into their homes. Experiences varied, with one volunteer recounting how flying return to Sydney in one day cost more than \$500. But as luck would have it, when this same volunteer flew back for the paralympics there were two new airlines so that it was only \$60 one way! Cost did prevent volunteers from participating but those who were able to invest themselves and their time, shared a priceless experience. Travelling in volunteer uniform was an added bonus. Everyone seemed to be positive and enthusiastic wherever they went, the volunteers, the people of Sydney, and the visitors to the Olympics and Paralympics.

It was a great honour to be a volunteer and assisting athletes in the Olympic and Paralympic Village. All volunteers felt the same about their positions – all lucky to be a living part of the experience. The SOCOG staff managing the volunteers had been recruited carefully and from my perspective, excelled in leadership, communication, organisation, flexibility, listening, delegation, training, monitoring, support and recognition.

Every good program has flaws and continuous improvement is one of the goals. In some areas volunteers were overstaffed and under worked. Somehow the latter seems to be a greater issue for volunteers. To not have enough work for a volunteer, when you have asked them to be there, is poor practice. It also seems to be that human nature encourages us to communicate to others if we are understaffed but we do not so readily admit that we are overstaffed. Volunteer managers have a responsibility to set the scales accurately on volunteer workload.

In the athlete's village, volunteers who were multilingual were placed in areas of responsibility where their second or third language would add value to their volunteer role. This generally worked well. In some areas, however, staff and volunteers were placed in the 'giant jigsaw puzzle' with a less than perfect fit. The SOCOG staff managing the volunteers in our area spoke fluent Japanese and had lived and worked in the hospitality field in Japan. Four of our volunteer team spoke German, one spoke Chinese and one Korean. Unfortunately the main language we needed for our work was Spanish! This mismatching of volunteers with a second language also occurred in some instances in the Paralympic village.

The experience for the volunteers was unforgettable and to be part of both the Olympics and the paralympics was magic. The highlights were:

- Sydney;
- the weather;
- the local Sydney people;
- transport;
- the crowds supporting everyone;
- 1.2 million tickets being sold for the Paralympics;
- the atmosphere of welcome and friendship;
- the volunteers; and
- the visitors.

SYDNEY SAYS 'THANK YOU'

Forty thousand volunteers were invited to meet and march together through the streets of Sydney in a ticker-tape parade. This included both the Olympic and the Paralympic volunteers. The Olympic volunteers, whose job had been done so brilliantly, enjoyed marching arm-in-arm with their volunteer teams. The Paralympic volunteers, excited about the prospect of their contribution, marched proudly. The emotion and excitement at being part of a moving mass of people was high. One hundred and ten thousand people came out of their homes, schools, offices and shops to say 'thank you volunteers'. It was also our chance as volunteers to say to the people of Sydney, 'Thank you for having us. It has been fun'.

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