



Next Door Garden

THE ART AND PRACTICE OF NEIGHBOURING

Civic Engagement and Volunteering
for the Local Community



Walter Villagonzalo, Jazmine Flores, Sam Leong
Isaac KP Ng, Raymond Loh, Jason Banico

The Art and Practice of Neighbouring

Civic Engagement and Volunteering for the Local Community

Walter Villagonzalo, Jazmine Flores, Raymond Loh,
Sam Leong, Isaac KP Ng, Jason Banico

A Book by Wyntree Nursery and Next Door Garden

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command:

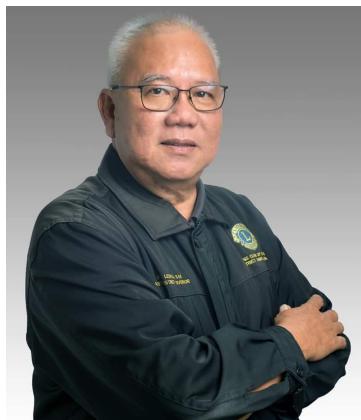
'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

Galatians 5:14.

Authors



Walter Villagonzalo. Walter was the City of Wyndham's Citizen of the Year 2015 . He is the founder and president of the Migrant Hub Inc. and Vice President for New Ventures, Social Enterprise, International and National Business Networking and Local Government Representation Australian Council for Multicultural Entrepreneurs Inc. and currently involved in establishing an advanced tree farm. He has served for more than two decades of voluntary community engagement and social entrepreneurship for the city of Wyndham.



Sam Leong. Sam is with the Community Service Leadership with Lions Club of Kuala Lumpur North. He served as District Governor In 1996/1997, and a recipient of 3 Lions Clubs International Presidents' Medals and a Leadership Medal. He also received the Red Crescent Humanitarian Award. He has also attained Distinguished Toastmaster Award with Toastmasters International. Author of GPS for Success & Happiness. Sam has more than 40 years of professional experience in various business activities and areas, as well as in community & humanitarian services in leadership roles. Has also been active in various capacities in business and trade organizations: He is a trained professional accountant, manager and trainer/speaker, and Life Coach, earning all his professional qualifications by self-studies and distance learning.

Sam possesses varied street-smart experiences in sales, management and leadership, which he used to train sales professionals, business executives, and youths, our leaders of the future. He has facilitated many learning and training sessions in sales, behavioural change, communication & public speaking, leadership & team-building, and management.



Isaac KP Ng. Sr Ng Kim Poh has over 43 years of practice and experience in the property industry serving clients locally and internationally, specialising in Property Development & Investment consultancy, Marketing & Sales, Viability & Feasibility studies and Project & Property management. In recent years, he has started to conduct feasibility & viability studies in the Senior Homes, Retirement Villages and Medical & Wellness industry as a Real Estate Specialist for AJT Holdings International, headquartered in Bangkok, Thailand with centres in Cambodia and Singapore.

Raymond Loh. Raymond is an entrepreneur, property developer and founder of many successful companies at local and international level, with expertise in education, training and IT, awarded the Lions Club International Highest Award and a District Fellow Club Member, with many Community awards to his credit.

Jason Banico. Jason is an IT professional and entrepreneur, with interests in using IT and social media to serve social enterprises and not-for-profits. He is a co-founder of Civic Space Australia.

Volunteering and the Sense of Belonging

by Walter Villagonzalo

I started my volunteering journey almost immediately after we arrived in 1986. I joined the Filipino Community Club in Werribee and also volunteered in other migrant associations like the Ethnic Communities Council of Werribee, the Migrant Resource Centre in Altona, and other groups.

In these early years, although I was very active, I felt that I did not belong or was appreciated. This is common among migrants. Some end up returning to their home country because of not having that sense of belonging.

Twelve years after our arrival, in 1998, I decided to bring my family back to the Philippines. I was travelling frequently between Australia and the Philippines, where I had an agrarian project, to rehabilitate land that was covered by lahar after the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. I felt like I was more accomplished and appreciated back there. One night, I announced that we were to stay in the Philippines for good, but our children, who were already in their teens, objected, as they felt they belonged in Australia. We prayed about it and decided to return.

Although committed to staying in Australia, I still had the issue of not feeling I belonged. I then worked on overcoming it by volunteering again and doing it a lot more. In doing so, I felt I belonged and was recognised. The sense of belonging became stronger as I spent more time volunteering. It was a virtuous cycle. I did it full-time, to the point that I ended up taking 50 different roles for the community!

In 2009, I organised the Migrant Resource Centre in Wyndham. We had a growing migrant community but didn't have such a centre. When I was volunteering at the Migrant Resource Centre in Footscray and was co-opted for the Centre in Altona Westgate, I noticed that a lot of the members were from Wyndham. I asked the Council for funding so we can have an office, but was turned down. I then gathered other members of the community and operated it as a social enterprise. We started a Community Cafe in Hoppers Lane as one of our team members was a chef from Malaysia. We set it up and operated it out of our own pockets. As the cafe turned profitable, we then had our Migrant Hub. The place was very busy, and frequently got featured in the local community papers.

It was for such work, and other volunteering engagements, that I was recognized by organisations like the Wyndham City Council, and the State and Federal Governments. I got awards like Volunteer of the Year, Elizabeth Moore Award finalist, Citizens' Community Engagement Award, Community Group of the Year Award for the Migrant Hub organisation, and Citizen of the Year. I went on stage 3 times!

It was always a great honour to receive them, but I wasn't doing it because of these accolades. I did it because I enjoy belonging to the organisations and giving back to the community.

The Need for Neighbouring

by Raymond Loh

How connected are Australians to their neighbours?

A third of Australians (34%) have no neighbours they see or hear from monthly. Nearly half of Australians (47%) have no neighbours they can call for help.

Our relationships with our neighbours are not close, with 70% of people saying they have no neighbours they would talk to about private matters.

However, those with close neighbour relationships see neighbours regularly – a third of Australians (30%) see a neighbour at least a few times a week or weekly.

Australians rarely talk to their neighbours about important decisions. Only 10% of Australians frequently have a neighbour available to talk to about important decisions, while 5% say their neighbours frequently speak with them about important decisions. Three-quarters of Australians (75%) never or seldom have a neighbour available to talk to and their neighbours rarely or never consult with them (82%) about important decisions.

What's behind this shift?

Maybe it's because we spend so much time on our phones or chatting online. Maybe it's the result of changing jobs and moving more frequently.

Just 11% of people have a large friendship group they see at least once a month, while 8% don't see any friends regularly. About one fifth never or seldom have a relative available to talk to.

The survey is still open for recruitment as part of a larger study run by Swinburne University.⁸ Nov 2018

One in four Australian adults are lonely. One in two (50.5%) Australians feel lonely for at least one day in a week, while one in four (27.6%) feel lonely for three or more days. Nearly 55% of the population feel they lack companionship at least sometimes.

About 60 per cent feel left out or isolated from others, according to the report. Members of the Greatest Generation are least likely to report having feelings of loneliness.

A report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) points out that more than one-third of adults aged 45 and older feel lonely, and nearly one-fourth of adults aged 65 and older are considered to be socially isolated.

Social isolation's adverse health consequences range from sleeplessness to reduced immune function. Loneliness is associated with higher anxiety, depression, and suicide rates. However it happened, there's a lot of evidence that it's a significant loss.

This book is about the art and practice of neighbouring countries, and we hope that it can help enlighten us to a way towards recovery.

The Law of Reciprocity

by Sam Leong

The adage that "What goes around, comes around", the Law of Reciprocity, is a universal truth that no one can change.

Recognising this, one can work along with this line of thinking to get what one desires. If one desires to be happy, make others happy. Invariably, the joy and happiness that others get will be bounced back to oneself. And in most situations, in stronger doses.

I have made it my life practice to make at least one person happy daily. How do I do it?

A simple action like wishing friends or even strangers good morning when we cross each other can give joy to the person we greet. Let me share my most recent example with you.

One morning, a group of us, senior citizens, decided to have our morning walk in Lake Garden. Our most senior member, Michael (78 years old and still very healthy), has never been to Lake Garden although he stayed and worked in KL/PJ for the last 40 plus years. On arrival, he exclaimed how he missed such a beautiful place for morning walks and thanked me for bringing him there. I could feel his joy walking in the garden and in turn, I felt happy too. A simple act of sharing a great walking venue brought joy to a friend and strengthened our bond in friendship.

See what I mean?

Another experience I would like to share is my connection with a former corporate hotshot, Datuk Lawrence Lim, who walks in the Subang Ria Park, near where I live. As usual, I greeted him when I walked past him as I would for everyone, during our morning. Nothing much transpired until one day when he asked if he could walk with me. I replied in the affirmative and chatted as we walked along. Then, to my surprise, he asked if it was correct that I play in a pop band. I confirmed that I do and he expressed his desire to engage our services. He then started sharing his challenges in organising his daughter's wedding. He was assigned with the challenge of arranging for the door gift, and he was lost as to what gifts he should present to their guests. He wanted to present them with memorable door gifts which they will appreciate and want to keep. I suggested that since he was engaging our services, we could help him produce a video with him singing a meaningful song with a message, dedicated to his daughter and her life partner. He liked the idea and became very excited about it. To cut the story short, we finalised the contract subsequently, and started coaching him to prepare him for the recording, rehearsal and finally produced his song! A Star was born !

We became good friends and he has joined our band since to sing with us for fun. We have built a mutually beneficial and warm relationship, and he has become one of our most active members. He has also sponsored the renovation of our club and extra facility of an in-house karaoke.

See the power of the simple "Good morning," and how it has helped bring us together as friends, enabled us to enhance our group's facilities, and provided our newfound team-mate with a platform to build on his singing hobby.

In his own words, "Since I retired from the corporate world, this is the best thing that has happened to me ! "

He confided then that he has always wanted to be in a band, but his profession has kept him away from his passion.

What goes around, certainly, comes around.

Finally, allow me to share a couple of stories of our many community services here.

A very close friend informed us during this pandemic, that a community nursing home needed to replace 20 mattresses to make it more comfortable for the senior residents. Without hesitation, I accepted the challenge and secured our Lions Club's approval and a budget to purchase the mattresses. As I always advocated, we should involve our community in our projects so that a "people helping people" culture can be nurtured. Thus, we formed a committee to do a fund-raising through personal donations to finance the project. To our surprise, we raised 3 times more than we required. We then have funds to fund other projects for senior citizens. Another event that proved that "what goes around, truly, comes around!"

My final story is our recent project - Students, We Care for you. At my behest, our Club decided to carry out a project to provide eyeglasses for 500 poor students who have visibility challenges. A budget of RM5,000.00 was approved. We got down to form a committee to carry out the task of identifying and reaching out to these 500 students.

One of our teammates, Lion Isaac Ng, on his initiative approached and secured the participation and services of one of Malaysia's largest chains of optical suppliers, Focus Point, to be our partners. With Focus Point's participation, our job became so much easier. They provided facilities of their 16 outlets in Klang Valley for eye screening and prescribed the glasses for the students. The employees of Focus Point were most helpful and provided efficient and friendly customer service to the selected students who had to observe strict SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) that made the job more challenging. Nevertheless, these employees performed exceedingly well and we managed to successfully prescribe 432 pairs of eyeglasses to the students at a much-subsidised price of RM4320.00. Without the subsidy by Focus Point, the project would have cost us many times more ! An estimate of RM20,000 would be considered conservative.

In conclusion, may I urge everyone to wish "Good morning with a smile" to people we come into contact with? This will make everyone happy and good things will happen. Also, do volunteer to serve those in need, and we will enter the realm of good samaritans who will respond to our good initiatives.

Believe that What goes around, truly, comes around !

Wisdom for volunteers:

"I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still, I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do."

Edward Everett Hale

Reaching Out to Our Neighbourhood

by Raymond Loh

I am an active member of my community.

My community plays a big part in my life besides my family and I jump at the right opportunity to give back each chance I get involved.

My family and I had always taken part in community group events and activities, such as my children's school council's policy and strategic planning, parents and teachers committee programs for a better educational outcome.

While I am an active member taking part in community projects and activities organised by Lions Clubs International Association and St. Vincent de Paul Society, I have been identified as a Society representative (Welfare Assistant) to visit homes in and around our neighbourhoods for the needy and the underprivileged.

Though it may seem trivial to many outsiders who may not be aware of the struggles of our neighbours, these community projects, events, and activities are at the core of our community and humanity.

In challenging times, your neighbourhood can be a great source of support. Kindness is compassion and love in perfect harmony that can transform someone's dark moment with a blaze of light. Showing kindness to fellow neighbours, supporting local businesses, and strengthening connections with your local community can have a major impact on the vitality of your neighbourhood.

Thriving communities are built by extending our hands to those neighbours we may not know and inviting them to build a stronger community together.

It is my responsibility to contribute to keeping this community thriving for years to come. One person can do a little bit of good to truly make a difference, and those little bits of good put together by our neighbours overwhelm the world!

Today, I am reaching out to my community. I choose to be active in my community and make a difference. I encourage others to do their part in making our community one that we can be proud of.

Self-Reflection Questions:

1. Do I regularly volunteer my time in the community?
2. Which events can I take charge of organising?
3. Do I plan on staying in this neighbourhood for years to come?

Life Is Service

by Isaac KP Ng

"I slept and dreamt that life was a joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was a joy." Rabindranath Tagore.

I came across the above statement by Tagore only a couple of years ago. I have been a Lions Club member for more than 30 years now. This statement rang true for me ever since. Serving the community in so many ways we know-how has truly brought me much joy every time my Club and I carry out humanitarian activities. The Lions Clubs International is the largest service organisation in the world with over 1.4 million members, guided by kindness to serve our communities and the world in times of need.

Mother Theresa once said, "I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples."

This is the essence of what Lions Club International stands for. With many hands make light work. A good friend once told me that one person taking a hundred steps is very different from 100 persons taking just one step. Our Club members for the last 5 decades have done just that. Together, we have made that difference to the communities we serve and brought joy not only to them but to ourselves as well. The Lions movement has become a major part of our lives and certainly shaped us into who and what we have become. It is in our blood. Our Lions' mission is to serve the underprivileged communities, in terms of improving health and well-being, strengthening and supporting those in need through humanitarian services and grants that impact lives locally and globally, and encouraging peace and international understanding.

Mother Theresa said, "Help one person at a time and always start with the person nearest you." The little we can do, we must do.

We Serve.

Innovative Volunteering for the Local Community

by Walter Villagonzalo

Where does one find opportunities to volunteer? The City Council has a unit that's dedicated to promoting volunteering because volunteers save the government a lot of money. The community does not just benefit from the time and effort given by the volunteers, but also from their unique skill sets, their passion, and innovative ideas as well.

For instance, though I will not volunteer to teach people how to fish, as I don't really love fishing, I would not hesitate to volunteer for something I am interested in or love doing. Right now, I'm into social enterprises. I put together a group of Nigerian Community and the Women's Support Group to have a business and be financially sustainable. I enjoy researching, putting ideas together, and connecting people to each other.

I also saw that there are a lot of things that weren't right, and needed to change in our community. It is easy to be an activist and complain about all the wrong things, but it's better to do volunteering and then get into the Council, to make changes from within.

Back in my early years of volunteering, one of the projects that the Victorian government had at the time was the Neighbourhood Renewal Project, done for Heathdale, within the 1 kilometre square of suburb around what is now Pacific Werribee Mall. The area had a low-income level and high crime rates. The wetlands in the area were a notorious haven for drug addicts. The government put in 8 million dollars to reorganise the community and to get the local community to be more productive and work together.

I volunteered, even though I don't live in Heathdale. I became the chair of the Pride and Participation Committee, tasked with creating activities to encourage people to participate and be proud of their community. I initiated events such as the Green Bike Program, and the Neighbourhood Watch, which I modelled from the local village police (called *baranggay tanod*) in the Philippines. It involved not just the crime watch, but also community building. The system was considered an innovation such that I was invited to speak to the Neighbourhood Watch division of the Australian police.

I started the Culture Club, which was training residents, mostly migrants, on how to build confidence and deliver public speeches. It was a fortnightly program.

I also started a community newsletter for the Heathdale neighbourhood, which won the Victorian Newsletter Award.

There also was the Barbecue Competition and Festival. I started that because we needed an activity that would bring the community together, and at the same time made use of the wetlands with overgrown trees and bushes, which suffered from a poor reputation as not being safe. We cleaned it up. It turned out that such a festival was the first in Australia! The Barbecue Blue Club in Queensland called me up and told me that it was never done before. It didn't occur

to me, as I was only doing it to solve our community's problems. That festival was a success and ran for 4 years.

Imagine what the local community can yet accomplish with the amount of time, talent, and resources that are still untapped today!

On Neighbourhood Relationships

by Raymond Loh

I value my relationships with my neighbours.

My neighbours are an important part of my life, and we are part of a strong community together. I appreciate the relationships I develop with my neighbours.

My neighbours make my life more fun and interesting.

They help me during a crisis and support me during difficult situations. They bring me food and encouragement. They give me advice and wisdom during complicated times.

My relationships with my neighbours are built on understanding, loyalty, and love. We care about each other's families and want to see everyone succeed. They respect my views and share their ideas. We may disagree on some things, but we always work to resolve our issues.

My neighbours help me celebrate important life events. I cherish the time we spend together as a group.

The neighbours around me are part of my joy and abundance.

My neighbours inspire and uplift me. They share stories to help me overcome obstacles and thrive in my happiness.

Today, I concentrate on my neighbours and our relationships. We have strong bonds that link us to each other and the community.

Self-Reflection Questions:

1. How can I help my family appreciate and value our neighbours?
2. What can I do to build stronger relationships with my neighbours?
3. How can I help my children understand that my neighbours have boundaries?

Dedication and Sacrifice

by **Walter Villagonzalo**

If somebody were to ask me what my job or career is, I would proudly say I'm a volunteer.

I served in the Philippine military for 15 years. We're trained, not in volunteer service doing community work, but in military service, to fight the country's enemies. Things changed when I became a Christian. My heart was then focused on helping others, and the community. If this didn't happen to me and had I stayed in the Philippines, I think I could have been a Philippine ambassador, a secretary of the department, or a military general. I know because those I've worked with are in those positions.

When we migrated to Australia, I started as a senior systems analyst for an insurance company. It would have been a lucrative IT career if I haven't pursued full-time volunteering. By full-time, I mean doing 30 hours or more a week. After 35 years in Australia, we're still paying off our mortgage. Despite all of this, I have no regrets. It's where God has put me, here in Australia, as a servant of the community, and I know that I'm serving my purpose. For this reason, I'm happy.

Although I have received awards for the works I have done, I wasn't doing it for them. It's good to be recognized, as it helped my family see all the appreciation, and that it was all worth it. I have sacrificed a lot of my personal and family time as a volunteer, and I'm blessed to have a supportive wife and family. For the Migrant Hub, we had asylum seekers coming in from Christmas Island, transitioning to be members of the community. We provided short term accommodations for them with the help of funding from the Red Cross. It took a lot of my personal and family time. For instance, instead of having dinner with the family, I was out at night until 2 am as one asylum seeker was out and causing problems in the neighbourhood. Even when I had a broken leg and was on crutches for 6 months, I was still helping them.

My team at the Migrant Hub were from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and even as far as the Middle East and Africa. They were leaders from their own communities. They understand the dedication and sacrifice that is needed. One of them, Maya, belonged to the Nigerian community and has a PhD in psychology. She invited me to one of her motivation programs to speak about what life is like being a volunteer. I said that being a volunteer is not about oneself, but about being for the community.

Sometimes, dedication and sacrifice are not enough. One also has to have persistence. Serving in the Council, one of the things I accomplished as a Councilor was to launch the innovation hub that provides co-working space. It was one of the reasons why I ran for Council. It took a lot of discussions and study with the Federal Government, but the Council said no. So I had to do the change from within as a Councilor.

Creativity is also a useful trait. It helped in my volunteering and service career to accomplish things for the community. I consider myself a “Blue Ocean” person, and it helped that I was doing things that aren’t popular or done by many people. I try to do new things and show others that it is possible. Many of my projects were in uncharted waters, like those involving social enterprises. I got trained with social enterprises early, back when there was only a handful, like a 100, in Australia. Now, there are 20,000 of them nationwide. In 2016, Social Traders named me the Social Enterprise Champion for Australia for setting up social enterprises such as incorporated associations and cooperatives.

On Giving Back

by Raymond Loh

I enjoy giving back to the community through community services, charitable donations through Lions Clubs International Association, St. Vincent de Paul Society, Canopy Accelerator Cooperatives, and The Tree Project volunteering in non-profitable organisations and social enterprises. I am constantly looking for new ways to get involved through various programs, collaborations, and partnerships.

Giving back to my community gives me a sense of pride. It makes me feel as if I am where I belong, doing what I am supposed to do.

When I give back to the community, I feel like I am making a difference in the world, one act of kindness at a time. Caring and sharing for one another is a human responsibility that we have for each other.

Giving back to my community makes me feel connected to those around me. When I volunteer, I meet other like-minded people who share a passion for improving my community. I also meet those who are less fortunate and simply need someone to care.

I can easily be part of the positive change by finding a list of community projects and service events in my area and getting involved or even starting my own social enterprises. Whether I join to be a volunteer of an organisation or a member of Lions Clubs International Association in our neighbourhood area, the social impact is great.

If I am unable to actively participate during a season due to other commitments, I give financial or mental support to help organisations that reach out on a regular basis to those in need.

Giving back requires empathy that I put myself in their shoes. I am blessed to have the ability to give my strength and funds to help others. Giving to others is rewarding!

Today, I reflect on all the blessings I have been given with a thankful heart. From this day forward, I choose to become more involved in my community and share my blessings by offering my time as a volunteer.

Self-Reflection Questions:

1. How has my community helped me become who I am?
2. Does my city have a community service calendar where I can volunteer?
3. Is there an organisation that I can support financially?

Leading Migrants to Volunteer

by Walter Villagonzalo

Before being in public service as a Councilor, I was performing my role as a Citizen of Year Awardee giving speeches at Citizenship Ceremonies. I told my story for 22 of these ceremonies, each having an audience of 400 new citizens and their families. I shared with them what volunteering has done for me, and the story resonated with them. I sometimes encounter them, at the mall, and express their appreciation for that inspiration. It's a very rewarding moment.

Setting an example of others to follow in the path to volunteering is something that needs to be done. Many migrants settle here and are hesitant to get out of their comfort zone to do something for the community.

One of the members of our Accelerator was a refugee Aghan who had a PhD from Kyoto University. He had been looking for a job so he can provide for his family. I encouraged him to volunteer, but he was reluctant because he needed to focus on job-hunting. I said that doing volunteer work while still looking for a job may help by providing him with a network of contacts. I'm glad that he listened.

In one of our Committees, we had a lady from Uruguay who was an engineer in Europe. She had a hard time finding a job too and was cleaning toilets to make a living. She was very disappointed and frustrated. She wasn't a refugee seeking asylum but voluntarily came here as a skilled migrant. As a volunteer, she became our representative and got interviewed in the local papers and spoke at a TV program on SBS, talking about how migrants have underutilised skills. As a result of that exposure, she got a lot of offers and is now a Senior Manager at a large Australian company. What would have happened if she did not volunteer?

Encouraging migrants to volunteer is something that needs to be emphasized. In 10 to 15 years, migrants will be the majority of our local community. If not enough of them will volunteer, what will happen to volunteer organizations like the Fire Brigade? It's also not just for us, but for the future generations as well. If we are not volunteering now, how will our children be encouraged to volunteer when their time comes?

Even at my age, I'm still working hard at volunteering and public service. I ran for Council six times and have been a Councilor for the City of Wyndham in 2017, and elected Deputy Mayor, too. I already feel like I have accomplished what I wanted to. With my health and age, I have a lot of reasons not to run for Parliament anymore, but I still do it. Why? I do it because I want to lead a path for the next generation of migrants to follow.

On Charity

by Raymond Loh

I take part in community projects and charitable events.

I actively seek community projects and charitable events in which to participate. I like to help those that are in need and hope to make their life better in some way. As I help others, I also enrich my own life.

My friends and family want to know what community projects and charitable events I am planning to take part in so they can also help those that are less fortunate. Likewise, if they find something that I can help with, I enjoy hearing about it also.

I also keep in touch with many people in my community about the community projects and charitable events that are happening in my area. I take part in as many as possible.

When my place of employment sponsors a community project or charitable event, they know that they can always count on me to help organise it. Participating makes me happy.

Helping others is mutually beneficial. I receive many benefits myself from helping those in need. I make new friends with others who have similar interests. I network with others in my community who are happy to mentor me or help advance my career.

But most of all, seeing the joy in someone's eyes when I help them is the best gift I could ever receive!

Today, I am thinking of the homeless people who live downtown under a bridge. I plan to buy some blankets for them to help keep them warm and dry.

Self-Reflection Questions:

1. What types of community projects and charitable events can I take part in today?
2. How can I enlist my friends and family to help build a stronger community?
3. How can I help the less fortunate and the needy on my own?

On Meeting Others

by Raymond Loh

I enjoy meeting others.

Socialisation is one of the most important parts of life. Having friends I can call when I need help and who also call me when they need me makes my existence more rewarding. However, sometimes friends come and go. Thankfully, meeting new people is easy and fun for me.

I have confidence in my ability to understand and relate to others. People tell me I have an easy smile and a comfortable way about myself. I make eye contact with those around me and pay attention to them because I am genuinely interested in them and their stories.

Greeting others and speaking to people whether I know them or not just seems like the natural thing to do. Even when I attend social events such as parties and neighbourhood get-togethers, I can walk up to anyone and start a conversation with him. Because I enjoy meeting others, my social life is diverse, active, and fun.

Today, I vow to take every opportunity to meet new people. I am confident that I can meet many new people and make friends quickly and easily.

Self-Reflection Questions:

1. How do I feel about meeting new people?
2. Do I approach others I don't know at a party, or keep to myself, waiting for others to come to me?
3. What can I do to make meeting new people come more easily to me?

On Contributing

by Raymond Loh

I contribute to my community.

Giving back to my community makes me feel better about myself. I see how I can use my unique strengths to make a difference.

I create better conditions for myself and others. I may clean up litter in a public park or tutor children after school.

I develop a sense of belonging. I recognize how much I have in common with my neighbours. We work together towards the same goals.

My life becomes more meaningful. I work for the common good. I connect with something larger than myself.

My time is one of the most important things I can give. Volunteering is a priority for me and I regularly include time for it on my calendar.

My talents are one of the most personal things I can provide. We all bring our own pieces to the puzzle. My experiences and abilities enable me to play a unique and valuable role.

Sharing material resources helps in many ways. When I donate money or supplies, I am helping community organisations to serve more people.

Today, I pay attention to the needs of my community and how I can help to fill them. I make the world around me a better place.

Self-Reflection Questions:

1. How would my community be different without me?
2. Why do I care about contributing to my community?
3. How can I become a more powerful force for strengthening my community?

On Support

by Raymond Loh

I support my community.

There are many ways for me to be a beacon of light for others. I contribute to the well-being of those around me however I can.

My community grows steadily when I purchase from local merchants and farmers. I see their progress when they are supported by the people who share the area with them.

Charity is another way to offer encouragement to those who live in my area. I offer my talents without charge to anyone on my block who is able to benefit from it.

The local nursing home benefits when I volunteer to spend time reading to senior citizens. It feels good to contribute to their quality of life and their happiness. Their families save money on care when I offer my talents without charge.

Environmental efforts ensure that the earth is preserved for future generations. I am an advocate for initiatives put on by local environmental groups.

I am conscious of my actions that can help or hurt the environment. I practice proper recycling and only use environmentally friendly products. This keeps my neighbourhood healthy and safe for the people who live here.

Today, I seek new ways to support my community. The people who live and work around me are my partners in building a positive future. I am happy to do what I am able to keep their ventures up and running.

Self-Reflection Questions:

1. In what other ways am I able to support the community?
2. What role do I play in my professional community apart from doing my job?
3. What are some of my favourite outreach opportunities?

COVID-19 and Neighbourhoods

by Jason Banico

As of writing, the world is gradually emerging out of the shadow of pandemic lockdowns. The crisis has impacted our physical and mental health, our economy, and our society in ways that will be felt in many more years to come. Much has been written about the detrimental effect of the coronavirus on our personal and mental health, as well as on the global economy. But how has an environment of fear, insecurity, and isolation, affected our neighbourhoods? Did it damage us as a common people?

Researchers from University College London (UCL) have found that the shared experience of the pandemic has brought a greater feeling of closeness, and higher levels of trust and shared values.

In their COVID-19 social study which surveyed more than 70,000 respondents, Dr Elise Paul, lead author and epistemologist, said that ‘there have been positive improvements in the way we feel about our neighbours when compared to before the pandemic’.

Feelings of unity and a sense of community increased by about 3 times from 2020 to 2021. 32 per cent of the surveyed Britons felt an increased sense of ‘shared values’ with their neighbours, an increase of 9 per cent. 35 per cent said they felt greater neighbourhood support, compared to 28 per cent in 2019.

In another research, a study of the impact of COVID-19 on neighbourhood social support and social interactions conducted in Umea, Sweden, by the Department of Social Work in Umea University and the School of Public Health in the University of Gothenburg, found that effects on the neighbourhood vary depending on the level of social capital present.

The level of social capital is defined by the density and strength of social networks and comes in three essential forms: networks of civic engagement, norms of reciprocity, and social trust.

In their study, neighbourhoods that already had high levels of social capital before the pandemic had a greater increase in social interaction and emotional support. The results indicated that neighbourhood relations have become more important in times of societal crisis and social restriction. It also showed that neighbourhoods with high social capital are more resilient to crises like the pandemic.

These studies demonstrate that there is hope for humanity, with the knowledge that adversity makes our neighbourhoods stronger. However, as the Swedish study has noted, we must also keep working towards increasing our levels of social capital to strengthen our neighbourhoods’ resilience to cope with crises.

Top 15 Benefits of Volunteering in Your Community

by Raymond Loh

Volunteering in your community is a win-win situation. Not only do you help those less fortunate than you, but you also receive many benefits as well - both personal and professional.

The best way to find me is to lose myself in the services of others. Our days are happier when we give people a slice of our time and a piece of our heart rather than a piece of our mind.

Nothing gives you satisfaction like giving back to your community. Volunteering brings knowledge, experience and positivity to your life.

Check out these benefits for giving back to your community:

1. You're reminded there's a whole world outside of yourself. Giving back helps you de-focus from yourself and your own challenges while showing you the struggles and needs of others.
2. Being a part of something bigger than yourself is rewarding. We're reminded of the impact we can make on others when we become a part of something bigger. Giving back to the community allows you those experiences.
3. Learn something new. Regardless of how you decide to help your community, it's likely you'll learn something you didn't already know.
4. Strengthen your confidence. Because you're helping others, you'll feel more positive about yourself.
5. Gain work experience. Depending on the type of community work you do, you could learn something that will help you in your job or future work.
6. Make new business contacts. Getting out and giving back to your community will help you meet more people. Because each person has a network of their own, you never know how far your positive influence could travel - bringing you new prospects, clients, or even job offers.
7. Helping others is a wonderful thing to do. It does your heart, mind and soul good to reach out to help others.
8. Become known in the community. If you want more people to know and recognize you, helping others is a great public relations strategy.
9. Make new friends. Because you'll encounter so many new people, you could meet people that you become friends with.
10. Strengthen your community. Volunteering contributes to your community by uplifting others in the community.
11. Know that you make a positive difference. Volunteering makes a difference to you, to the agency you volunteer for, and to your community.

12. We don't operate in a vacuum. Living your best life involves making and maintaining connections with others. Giving back to your community develops a network of resources you'll be able to access when you need them.
13. Add to your resume. Volunteering gives you marketable experiences and qualifications to include in your resume.
14. Volunteering is a real-life experience that can't be had in the classroom. Some college instructors recommend "service learning" which is another term for "volunteering" or "giving back to your community." Service-learning provides a real-world experience to students that would be impossible to learn in the classroom.
15. View how others live. Seeing how others live their lives enhances your own life.

Giving back to your community is important for a number of reasons. By volunteering, you view a world outside of yourself, learn new things, develop positive feelings, gain job experience, and make new contacts. Plus, helping out in your community is a kind and wonderful thing to do. Kindness is having the ability to speak with love, it is the language that the deaf can hear and the blind can see. People will forget what you said, but they won't forget how you made them feel.

You might become well-known, make new friends, strengthen your community, and even add a line to your resume when you volunteer.

When you give back, you'll experience things in the real world that you can't in the classroom and you'll see how others live. For these reasons and more, make it a point to give back to your community.

If you have the time to make someone or your neighbours happy, do it. You'll be inspired!