

Volunteering for Your Future

(Part of the Follow Your Dream series)

by Kathie Hightower and Holly Scherer

Okay, so you've done the interest inventories and information interviews. You know what your dream career is. You are ready to apply for a job that fits.

Then you move with the military and what you want to do is simply not available at that location. What do you do? Give up? Settle for a career field you aren't that excited about? Take a job, any job? Unfortunately, that is what many of us do.

A better idea would be to see if you can find or create the job you want via volunteer work. If that isn't possible, identify the skills you will need for that dream job — be it computer, marketing, managing others, fund-raising, PR — and find volunteer work that will teach you those skills.

I had just started into the seminar business when we moved to Germany. The seminar companies I'd interviewed with did not have any international work. I couldn't afford to set up as a business in Germany (with the high tax rate and complicated laws) so I couldn't market my seminars to corporations located there. I feared that the progress I'd made in my seminar skills development would quickly fade if I didn't keep at it. So I found volunteer opportunities to speak. A new acquaintance told me about the American Women's Activities Germany (AWAG) conferences. I sent a proposal and ended up doing six workshops that first year and numerous ones every year after that. From that I spoke at many area AWAG workshops. From that I spoke at many wives club meetings. I volunteered to do free workshops about Job Finding Skills and Personal PR in our community.

Not only did all these volunteer presentations keep my skills up and improve upon them, it gave me testimonials for my marketing packet and visibility that eventually resulted in some paid work as well. Let me mention that this was in the days before the Army's AFTB program. If that program had been available it would have been the perfect place to get lots of platform time as well as some added Train the Trainer courses.

My fellow members in the National Speakers Association are envious of the opportunities I had to speak internationally — in Germany, Italy and Belgium — that mark me as an International Speaker. Not to mention the pleasure I derived from traveling to and speaking in fabulous places like Garmisch and Bamberg and Heidelberg and Vincenza. And it came mostly from volunteer work.

I've built my writing business the same way, using a regular column for the Ft. Lewis Wives Club newsletter followed by the Heidelberg Wives Club newsletter as the stepping stones to continued writing. Now I continue with a mix of paid and unpaid writing as I build the skills and portfolio I need to pursue my dream of writing fulltime.

Other military spouses have applied the power of this tool. Sherry had been working as a secretary although her dream was to open and run a bakery. When she moved to Bamberg, Germany, she couldn't find a secretarial position. She saw that as an opportunity to pursue her dream. She took a job with a Subway Sandwich shop with the express purpose of learning all about running a small business, learning what works and doesn't work, so she'll be ready when she opens her bakery.

Sarah wanted to work in marketing, so she volunteered at the community's Marketing office to learn the ropes. Rochelle, who knew absolutely nothing about computers, volunteered at

the ACS Referral office, providing her daily opportunities to learn the computer. She was even sent to local training courses. Nancy wants to own her own Cat Resort.

She first volunteered at her Community's Vet clinic and was eventually hired at the vet clinic at her next location, giving her the opportunity to keep learning the ropes — and building her credibility — before she puts her own money and time into her Cat Resort.

Sarah now works in marketing for a major company in Washington State. Today, Rachelle not only feels very comfortable working with computers, she is teaching others. She has even set up her own web site to keep her extended family members stay connected and informed as she moves with her children and husband from one military location to another.

We are not sure if the other spouses have continued pursuing their dream. Maybe they chose not to. Maybe doing the volunteer work gave them the chance to find out that that field/business wasn't right for them after all. That's another advantage to the volunteering-- learning what you like and don't like without spending your time and money on a degree or business.

So what if you have to earn a living — have to take some job? Well, then apply the concept to your job search. Look for a job that allows you to learn or improve on some of the skills you will need in your dream job. And on the job ask for opportunities to take on projects or training that will enhance those skills. And if you do fit in some volunteering, look for those projects that advance your skills. Volunteering — it's a win-win proposition.

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