



**United Way**



## **Volunteering, I recommend it!**

**Michele lived on the streets for a few years, but that never stopped her from volunteering.**

“I learned many skills through volunteering, it helps me in networking and keeps my brain active. For me, it’s been nothing but beneficial. I recommend it!

I started using hard drugs in my twenties, then I went to university to earn a degree in community studies. Because of my drug use, after graduating I ended up living in the streets for several years. I would always utilize any resources out there, like food banks, shelters, and day centres. So, I became familiar with United Way from that perspective.

At one food bank, I made a real connection with someone who was working there. She was so loving and caring and never judgemental. It became a place of solace. I just wanted to go in there and talk.

But I was also helping out all the time, with after-school programs and food preparation for instance. It’s a family thing. My mother volunteered and so did her sister. I’ve done it so many times, I can’t remember all of them. It makes me feel good, that’s the number one reason why I do it—just the joy I feel from the people that I interact with, that I’ve



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done something to make them feel better. When I was in university, I worked with a restorative justice program for young offenders. Four or five of these kids wrote me thank you letters for helping them. I'm genuinely proud of that.

I struggle with depression. I might have been dead today if I hadn't volunteered. Many times, volunteering made me have to get up and go out. When I had an obligation, I would live up to it, even while I was using drugs. If you have nothing but time on your hands, why not give that time? There are more than enough needs to go around. Do what you can. Maybe you have never volunteered and don't realize how good it is to give instead of receive.

Many people are afraid to volunteer, but we could overcome that with communication, by reaching out and talking to someone you don't know. A smile does a lot. The language doesn't matter—it's what is in your heart that counts.

Today I have a place to live, and I'm no longer a hard drug user. I'm 62 years old, and I'm alive. So that's a success story. I may have had a rough life, but I don't consider it like that. It's just my life."



**It's a privilege to do this**



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**Bridget and her husband Shawn have built their personal and company values around serving the community.**

“My husband Shawn and I feel our community involvement is a privilege. We get to do this, while so many people can’t. When we took over a hotel and campground in a small community, one of the first things we did was reach out to the local United Way. We wanted a partner to help us with the community engagement aspect of our business. Eventually, we were asked to chair the local United Way campaign, and for the first time, it raised one million dollars in the community.

Some people are looking at the books and counting the pennies, and they think you should only contribute to charities once you’ve made a profit. Shawn and I have a different perspective: We feel that you should give all along the way, not wait until you earn your millions, then make a big donation. We hope to do that one day, of course, that would be wonderful and grand. But in the meantime, we do what we can. I believe that if everyone gives a little, it adds up to a lot.

My business and professional connection with United Way goes way back. My first job was at a community centre, which relied on United Way as a major funder. Later, when I started working in government in my twenties, I was tapped on the shoulder by my director who suggested I volunteer to run the office giving campaign. They said that it was a great opportunity and would help my career. I did a lot of research to learn the ins and outs of United Way and eventually I became a leadership donor.

On a personal level, I gain a sense of purpose from partnering with United Way because they support local communities and people of all ages across the social spectrum. They have helped people who are near and dear to me, including friends and family members, including those who had dementia, and who have struggled with mental health challenges, unemployment, learning disabilities and addictions.

With the pandemic, United Way agencies have had to deal with increased pressure on services, but it has also allowed them to educate people about serious issues. People who are struggling with isolation and depression often can’t afford counselling. Going through the list of United Way-funded agencies in my community, so many of them have a mental health component, which often gets overlooked in the health care system. These programs are more critical than ever.

People may think that United Way is this big thing, but it’s very locally focused. It’s an umbrella organization, but all the money remains within the local community. There’s a simple phrase ‘local love’ that really resonates with me because that’s what it’s all about.”