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## Volunteer centre makes getting started simple

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Mercury Staff

"The beginning is the most important part of the work."

Plato wrote that and I've been thinking about it a lot lately. Mostly because I have a hard time with beginnings. Take the first two paragraphs of this column, for example.

What if there was a place where the important work, the beginning work, was done for you?

Where volunteerism in Guelph is concerned, there is such a place.

Did you know that the Volunteer Centre of Guelph/Wellington has no answering machine? That's because, during business hours, there is always someone there to answer the phone and your questions.

Did you know that the volunteer centre is located right downtown at street level on Cork Street? That way it's easy to get to if you'd rather speak to someone in person. No appointment necessary.

Did you know that in addition to keeping a record of up-to-date volunteer opportunities on-site, the centre publishes vacancies at [www.volunteerguelphwellington.on.ca?](http://www.volunteerguelphwellington.on.ca?)

If you find something of interest, you need only enter your name and contact information and an email will automatically be sent to the organization you've selected, which will reply within five business days.

That's just the beginning.

How do the centre's seven knowledgeable staff members match volunteers with vacant positions in non-profit organizations? They work one-on-one, for as long as it takes, with young people, university students, retirees, new Canadians, stay-at-home parents, employees, persons with disabilities and groups of volunteers to determine what, exactly, they'd like to accomplish with their efforts.

For some, it's as simple as giving back. For others, it's learning a new skill or supporting a cause.

Staff members also work closely with non-profit organizations, keeping track of vacancies, yes, but also building relationships with them. So when you stop by with a general interest in the arts, but have been unable to find a position online that suits you, membership service coordinator Sandra Wiggan might direct you to a group that is in the process of organizing a new arts festival and which will soon be seeking volunteers.

"It's all about connections," executive director Cathy Taylor says.

And while the centre has a great deal of information to give, it's the feedback from volunteers and organizations that shapes its contribution to our community.

Consultations with new Canadians taught Taylor and her staff about the kinds of networks that new Canadians need to establish. Earlier this year, the centre published a directory of key local services of interest to new Canadians, which is now available in seven languages.

Inquiries from parents with young children revealed that there are very few opportunities for families.

"One of our priorities is advocacy," says Taylor, who is working with non-profit groups to offer volunteers a greater variety of options.

Meetings with non-profit organizations revealed that despite the high level of community participation by residents of Guelph, many vacancies go unfilled. The centre responded with the Time to Give Challenge, an initiative and tool kit that gives local employers the support they need to encourage volunteerism among their employees.

Plato was right, of course. This is the important work.

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