

Volunteering – it's all upside!

By Andrea Kirby

To show you that you can do it, I am sharing my story.

Starting as a grade parent

I arrived from the UK in 2015. I wasn't working at the time and wanted to make connections with my son Tom's class, so I became a grade parent. We were allocated a really simple stall at that year's fete, which lost money but was fun nonetheless. I got to know the parents better and felt like I was contributing something (not sure what but it was something).

Two years of Silent Auction...

The following year the whole of Grade 2 were allocated the Silent Auction and Restaurant Raffle in the great fete lottery – it's one of the big ones that makes people groan. As a grade parent along with seven other mums, it was up to us to gather the troops and make it work. The best bit was that it was now shared between four classes so there were 8-10 mums all working together with support from the previous year's organisers (who had been a team of three!). Along the way, we gathered a couple of extra volunteers but not many. Right from the outset, we agreed to take it online as, with so many of us, it was going to be easier to do.

What started out as a groan and a panic, ended up being one of my most valuable times. I made fantastic friends, I met countless locals, we raised a decent amount of money and, along the way, I found new skills and confidence to go out and start my own business in 2017. Don't get me wrong. It's a hard job and a huge effort!

So why has it been one of the best things I have done?

Firstly, I have worked with that group of fantastic women for two years now. We planned the whole thing over cheese platters and wine and we worked out where skills were best used and we used them. When one of the group was under pressure with their day job and their personal life, someone else picked up the slack. We shared ourselves and found a great way to work together. It was everything that I thought being a school parent would be.

Fronting up to the store owners in our local area and asking for a donation was the hardest and the most rewarding. It's the bit that stops many from volunteering and, let me say, if you are not getting involved, you are missing probably the best bit.

How did we do it?

One of our group is in marketing and she created a fantastic script for us. She even hit the streets first and came back and shared her experience (she was the one with chutzpah). So, putting on my big girl pants, I hit Johnson Street. That first visit into a store (a dog café) had me shaking in my shoes.

My spiel went like this: *'Hi, are you a new business as I have not seen you here. You are? Fantastic and what a lovely concept! My name is Andrea and I am a mum from North*

Fitzroy Primary. Our school fete is in November. As part of that we run a silent auction. This year we are taking it online and will be doing as much as advertising as we can for our local businesses. Would you be willing to donate a voucher or product that we can auction off? All proceeds go to our literacy program that needs lots of new books? Thank you! \$50 is very generous for a new business. We really appreciate it. Oh, and while we are here, I think I will take one of those special dog cakes home to Loopsy Lou'.

Down Johnson Street I went and then on to Queens Parade. As I was not working at the time, I picked up a little more than some of the others during the day. Others in the team contributed by writing the comms or setting up the online site - things they could do outside of working hours.

WIIFM (What's In It For Me)

I am a confident person. I have headed up big recruitment teams in law firms, consulting and even a stint recruiting at Harrods dealing with 'The Chairman' (Al Fayed). I can speak in public and I'm happy to voice an unpopular opinion. I am the loudest at parties and I love being the centre of attention. But asking for a donation?

Noooooo. Not me! I couldn't possibly do that. Too scary!

But I did and I had fun doing it. Stores said no but when they did, it was always with an apology as they were sponsoring other schools or communities closer to them. But, when they said yes the rush felt so good!

In 2016 we raised \$20,000. In 2017, a little less but given the team size but still very good. Wow! We were so proud and felt a real sense of achievement (and exhaustion). The champagne to celebrate tasted sweet!

Get involved, you won't regret it!

Join the Fete Committee. Volunteer for Silent Auction. Nominate for School Council. Who's in for getting the Gala up and running for September? That will be a fun one! Organise the Mother's & Special Carers Stall (if you are a dad!) and mums can do the Father's Day stall! You can organise the donations for the JSC raffle or indeed any fundraiser - the mango drive, the bulb drive.

We have a list and a calendar of events. We have informative notes and we have mentors to give you guidance - but you can make each event your own.

We need lots of you involved and from my experience, you won't regret it. There are a small group of parents working hard on top of their normal jobs and lives to make this happen. We need more. Remember, if we all did a little bit, then some won't have to do the lot.

In 2017, I did it. On top of starting up a business and asking people for money to sponsor my events. A business that a year ago I didn't think I could do. Working on the Silent Auction made me realise I could.

Don't be shy. Don't think you can't - you can!