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ICOS

Meet The Volunteers:

Kelly



How did you first learn about ICOS and what motivated you to start volunteering with us?

I initially heard about ICOS on Facebook, and I began first as a participant, rather than a volunteer - coming along to workshops and trips. The more



activities I attended, the more I learned about ICOS, and I loved not only the environment ICOS created - and the opportunities they presented - but also the ethics that they stand for. ICOS deals with everything from advocacy; asylum assistance; modern day slavery; housing advice; GP, dentist and school sign ups; benefits; and employment - through to signposting; care; information; advice; and guidance. Lots of serious and important issues! However, they also focus on wellbeing and health - both mental and physical. They promote engagement; socialising; emotional and physical enrichment. They harvest a feeling and sense of community, family and belonging; and they do this through arts and culture; volunteering opportunities; environmental activities; nature walks and talks; learning; wellbeing and self-improvement workshops; sports; day trips; cooking; public engagement; gardening and park maintenance; hands on experiences; community events; and above all - fun!!!

ICOS is the full package! Staff and fellow volunteers are so welcoming and supportive. I just knew I wanted to be a part of this. And together, as a collective, we help to make our community a better place to live in - and we also help to give more opportunities to the people who live in it!

Can you share what you enjoy most about your volunteer work at Backhouse Park? Are there any particular experiences or moments that stand out to you?

I think the main thing I most enjoy about volunteering at Backhouse Park is helping to put on the larger scale events that bring together all members of our community in a safe and welcoming space - regardless of age, race, language, ethnicity, gender, orientation, or social circumstances; everyone is welcome! ICOS events are all inclusive, no one gets left out, we work together for a common good - promoting social cohesion and encouraging people from all walks of life to get involved and enjoy the fun. Watching everyone interacting, engaging, chatting, laughing and forging friendships with one another is so uplifting, and as I like to put it 'good for the soul'. I find these positive interactions in Backhouse Park promote harmony, understanding, compassion and kindness. It's such a large, beautiful and serene, happy space, that we can both reach, and cater for, a larger volume of the public - changing perceptions and garnering a sense of togetherness and belonging.



Furthermore, it encourages people to get out, use, and enjoy, the stunning scenery and nature that we have on our very doorstep. It inspires people to take pride in our local area, to respect our environment, and it inspires members of the public to take better care of our surroundings. ICOS always promotes a greener, healthier, more sustainable lifestyle, and these events aid us in getting our message across and help make our community a better, stronger, and more positive place to live.

The stand out experiences and moments for me have again, taken place, on our larger events, such as our Family Fun Day; Refugee Day; Earth Day; and Children's Day. The turnout and volume of people attending have always been amazing - hundreds of people! As these events are always free to the public, those who are experiencing financial issues (which is the majority of Sunderland - we tend to have a higher than average population of poverty and social deprivation) and are economically challenged, can enjoy a full day of free, fun, action packed activities. Just knowing that ICOS, us volunteers, and indeed the generosity of funders, are contributing to alleviating these sorts of pressures on both individuals and families makes my heart feel full. Seeing the joy on peoples faces (especially the children) at the amount of activities on offer at these events - arts and crafts (which people can create and take home free of charge) such as jewellery making, fairy forest terrariums, pebble painting, drawing, colouring, and kite making, to name but a few; games; circus skills; storytelling; bubble blowing; yoga; music; dancing; sports; characters (such as Spiderman); planting herbs, fruit, flowers and vegetables in pots to take home to nurture and grow; cultural food and picnics; and educational activities and stalls - is so unbelievably heart warming. The things we can accomplish and achieve when we all work together never ceases to amaze me, and it makes me very proud to be an ICOS volunteer.

Moreover, these events help to educate the public on an array of different opportunities available to them - and through the many different stalls - they become aware of what is open to them, that they otherwise might not have known about. Likewise, being introduced to different organisations and opportunities gives people the confidence to get involved with them. So, yes, being a part of these experiences are most definitely the highlights of volunteering in Backhouse Park! However, saying that, the smaller events, such as gardening in the park; nature walks and talks; and bird identification



workshops etc. are always fabulous too, as I get to know people on a more personal level; and I also get to take a breather, and reconnect with nature more strongly.

In what ways has volunteering at Backhouse Park with ICOS impacted your overall well-being and personal growth?

It has impacted me immensely. My confidence, self-worth, and self-esteem have grown massively. I feel I have learned a lot about other cultures which has been extremely enjoyable, enriching and enlightening. I have honed my organisational skills and communication skills; worked independently using my initiative; and found just how invaluable teamwork is. I have learned to be more adaptable; I don't fear change as much as I used to; and I'm much more likely to embrace new experiences.

Furthermore, I'm more aware than ever of environmental and sustainability issues and I am now fully conscious of integrating more eco-friendly choices and decisions into my lifestyle. I am also out a lot more in the fresh air and enjoying the beauty of nature.

I have to say, I get a lot of self-fulfillment, pride, and satisfaction from volunteering with ICOS, and I'm definitely a more positive person because of it. I have made lots of new friends, and have developed a strong sense of purpose and belonging - not just to ICOS, an organisation that I absolutely love - but also to my community in general. I really do feel valued. Due to this I feel I am better as a person! My emotional intelligence has increased, and my compassion and empathy has been strengthened.

Overall, I feel more equipped to deal with life's major challenges and also the everyday trivialities. I'm looking forward to the future, and I'm excited about taking on new opportunities and experiences. Volunteering in Backhouse Park has been lifechanging for me, and the expansion in my wellbeing and personal growth has been a very welcome journey indeed!!

What kinds of volunteering do you get involved with?

Aside from the larger and smaller scale events I assist with in Backhouse Park



and the like, my primary role in ICOS is the 'Events and Wellbeing Volunteer'. As such, I focus on organising events; thinking up fun new activities for us to try; planning trips and meet ups; thinking of ways to bring people together; and above all contemplating how we can all have a fantastic, fun, happy time!

So, I might do a bit of admin, like sending and responding to emails; contacting organisations that we can forge relationships with and collaborate together so that we can get more opportunities and widen the scope of our activities - because I really want to have something that will appeal to everyone. Sometimes, I might have meetings with these external agencies, or I'll pop into the ICOS office to have meetings and discussions with Daniel. I'll then get to the planning stage - dates, locations, times etc. and I'll start to advertise the event on Facebook and WhatsApp. Next comes signing people up; answering queries; and keeping everyone up to date. Then it's the activity or event - I'll help with the paperwork - and then we'll all have fun!! Yey!!!

I like to communicate with our ICOS members to see what activities they would like to do. Over the past few weeks we've done bowling and mini golf; nature walks; gardening workshops; held a Children's Day; participated in arts and crafts; batik; and mudlarking down by the river!! We also held a Refugee Day where people brought food from their home countries and we all sat down and ate together, listened to music, danced, participated in quizzes, socialised, and got to know one another. It really was an amazing day, and I was blown away by how many people attended and just how generous people were! The amount of food we had was unbelievable and every single dish was absolutely delicious!! This was probably one of my favourite events so far (although Santa Day last year, where I helped to build Santa's grotto, decorate stalls, and supervise the children on the soft play area is a very close second, Ho! Ho! Ho!).

All in all, I absolutely love knowing I'm helping to make a difference, that I'm contributing to my community and that I'm promoting wellness, positivity and wellbeing. So listen up guys! We have some really cool things coming up - so watch this space and come and get involved!!!

What advice would you give someone who is interested in volunteering



for ICOS?

Just go for it and have fun! ICOS staff and fellow volunteers are really supportive; there's a ton of activities to get involved in; ICOS will help you with a DBS check and travelling expenses; you'll get tasty meals on the full day volunteering events (and sometimes on the shorter ones too, yum!); there are loads of diverse opportunities; lots of socialising; and you'll meet a myriad of new friends from all corners of the globe. It really is fantastic!

You can volunteer as much or as little as you like, there's no pressure whatsoever, and every little helps! Whether you're more of a behind the scenes person (helping with admin in the office, setting up and clearing away events) or a public facing person (helping with arts and craft stalls, food stalls, office based advice and guidance, form filling, meet and greets etc.), there really is a role for everyone. Don't be afraid to get involved, you'll be supported and looked after every step of the way.

You will also grow as a person, learn a ton of new skills, experience cultures and food from all over the world - and you will really feel valued. I can guarantee you will see a positive difference in yourself. Volunteers are a vital part of ICOS, you will be making a massive difference to others and our community - and of course it looks great on your CV to potential employers! But above all, you will have masses of fun; you'll get to try things you've never experienced before; you'll do loads of amazing activities, daytrips, sports, arts and crafts (the list is endless) - and of course, you'll get to join our fantastic WhatsApp group!! So remember, you really have everything to gain and nothing at all to lose, so go for it!!
