Beth Hello we're live from the zone at the OU Students Association in Milton Keynes and I'm Beth Head of Student Volunteering and I've got some of my team members here with me today. So we've got…

Paul I'm Paul and I work for the digital communications team.

Sammi I'm Sammy I work in student support.

Verity And I'm Verity I'm the head of student support.

Beth And we're here today because it is student volunteering week and during student volunteering week we're thinking about civic volunteering which means volunteering out in your local community. So we've got loads of great volunteers at the Students Association who work with us but today instead of focusing on those wonderful volunteers we're going to think about all the other people who are doing things in their local communities because as we know you're all based all over the place.

So the first bit we're going to talk about is the things that we do and then we're going to have a little think about what OU students do. So I've got these three people with me particularly because we're all volunteering in our local community. So who wants to go first and have a talk about what it is that you do.

Paul Yeah I'll start.

Beth Yeah Paul so what is it that you do in your local community?

Paul Well I've done lots of stuff. One thing that was really good fun was the Rugby World Cup. So I worked with the Parks Trust with that and that was good fun. It was like a fan zone. So fans from the games could come and watch other matches in a big tent and there was lots of different things going on.

Beth That's good.

Paul But the main thing that I do that's more ongoing is a charity called BucksVision and they're a sight loss charity and they do lots of different things for people who are blind and visually impaired. And there's lots of different groups and activities and I'm involved in a walking group and they do different lengths of walks for different people. And every month I pick up some of the members, take them out, have a walk around the lakes and parks around Milton Keynes. And then we take them to a pub or café afterwards. They have a chat and then we drop them all off.
Verity That sounds like fun.

Beth It does sound like fun.

Paul Yeah and a lot of them are very elderly as well so they don't get to go out much and see people, so it's a great chance for them to socialise and meet other people and talk about living with sight loss to other people who can help them. So it's really good fun.

Beth How did you get involved with that?

Paul Well originally I had a friend at university who was blind so I met him and we became friends and I got used to leading him around, that kind of thing, and guiding him. And I actually did some reading for him at university, so essays and stuff like that. And so I had a bit of experience with that and then I just, by total chance, ran into BucksVision at a volunteering fayre and then did all the training and got involved and so that's how it all started.

Beth Yeah. It's usually through something that you're already involved in or something you're already doing that you find out about these things. How about you Sammi?

Sammi So I have volunteered since I was about 13, 14, it's something I've done for a very long time. I just always enjoy it. I like keeping busy, I'm not really a TV person but the one I've done more recently, similar to Paul, it's for a listening service. So it's a charity and I've done that for about four years in January and that is basically supporting callers who are experiencing feelings of distress and despair and I do it on a weekly basis, but every six weeks I also do a night duty which is like midnight until six a.m.

Beth Oh ((laughs))

Sammi Yeah so it is hard but it's really rewarding because at the start of the call you'll speak to somebody who's in a really difficult place and going through a difficult time and by the end of the call they're either calmer and they've talked things through or the situation hasn't changed but they've taken a load off their shoulders and sometimes just talking is all they need. But other times they need more practical advice and it's just about exploring options with the callers and making sure that they've got somebody, because a lot of our callers tend to be people who are isolated and lonely or people who don't have a good support network and so we are their support network. And I also got involved through university as well, it was in my Students' Union I saw the roles being
advertised and I thought, ‘Well I've got loads of time on my hands so I might as well.’

Beth  So you've been doing it for quite a while then?

Sammi  Yeah basically, four years. And I've taken up other volunteering roles within the charity as well so I'm on the training team, so I train new volunteers, I train existing volunteers because we have to go through ongoing training. And then I help organise the night rota as well, so making sure all night duties are filled and there's always somebody in the branch basically when it's open.

Beth  Okay. Yeah keeping very busy then. So what about you Verity?

Verity  I'm quite similar to Sammi in that volunteering's been something I've done for a really long time. I've gone from volunteering at the Citizens Advice Bureau to being a cyber mentor for ((beep?)) bullying to three months in South Africa in human rights offices. But recently I just really like the idea of giving back, you've got time to give you might as well do it, what else are you doing to help your fellow man, that kind of stuff, I'm all for that.

At the moment I am a director at a charity called Homeless Rugby and I've got into it very much through Rugby World Cup, big deal back in 2015, not so great on our performance since said World Cup but we won't go there. We won't talk about that but I've been playing rugby for a number of years, I love the sport and I got involved with basically it's Homeless Rugby do very much what Homeless Football do, they try to get homeless people across the country to come together, work as a team, do the training together, learn a discipline, and rugby is very disciplined you can learn a lot from it. Last May we had our first even Homeless Rugby World Cup. We only had three nations there but…

Beth  Who was there?

Verity  It was Wales, Scotland and England.

Beth  Oh got to start somewhere.

Verity  Well absolutely, it was hosted over at the Worcester Warriers ground and the guys that took part absolutely loved it and seeing what they get out of it and they've gone on to get jobs. One of them's gone into the army world rugby TV and they did a big (0:07:13?) they gave us a ten minute segment in their hour-long show, but they loved it, they want to come back and just seeing how important it is to people to help them get out of a situation because for us one
of the things we always like saying is nobody chooses to be homeless, on a
cold night, especially the ones we’re having at the moment nobody chooses to
be out there, if they could they’d do something about it and we just want to
give them a helping hand to do so.

Beth That sounds great. Yeah my volunteering experience is very similar either
through things I enjoy doing and then you get roped in a little bit more, getting
involved at the local sports clubs that I’m involved in you end up helping
behind the bar and then before you know it you’re attending meetings but it’s
usually because it’s something you want to see the service keep going so you
get involved to help out.

Verity Absolutely.

Beth And then also you’re able to gain a few extra skills whilst having that good
feeling which is always nice.

Verity Definitely.

Beth Is there anything while you’re volunteering that you’ve gained or got out of it
that you didn’t expect? I think sometimes it can be a bit of a shock when you
suddenly think, ‘Oh I've got involved with this, didn’t realise I was going to go
to this conference where there’s thousands of other people talking about this
big thing.’

Paul What I've found is I thought it would be a nice thing to do, it would be good in
the community but I think everyone who’s volunteered in my group really
enjoys it and that really comes across. So it’s not like just the people you're
volunteering to help it’s actually quite good fun and you have a big group going
out on a walk and everybody’s enjoying it, each other’s company and one
great thing is I didn’t realise there were so many different places around Milton
Keynes you can actually go for walks. I just thought it was all roundabouts and
concrete cows and things like that. But there’s actually loads and loads of
parks, loads of lakes, woodlands, all sorts of places. And then I've been able
to then take friends and family round those same walks and look at the
different things at a later date. So you get a lot out of it that you don’t…

Verity And especially going different seasons, so seeing all the different seasons as
well.

Paul Exactly yeah.

Beth So even if it’s bad weather would you do something else maybe?
Paul  We usually try to go ahead no matter what and we've taken some real soakings before so yeah. So we're quite hardy and try and do it unless it really, really is bad. But it runs through the year apart from winter, we take a bit of a break in winter but yeah it's good.

Verity  I think it's the things that you learn that you don't realise you're learning, if that makes sense, the things that are most empowering, it's those soft skills that everybody always talks about but they're so important, it's learning how to talk to somebody, it's learning how to be empathetic and it's the things that you don't look at necessarily as skills. It's things I've picked up and I'm pretty good at that but that's not a skill I can just do it.

Sammi  Yeah.

Paul  And they can be useful in your career as well can't they?

Verity  Absolutely, definitely.

Sammi  I found like before this role I thought I was a really good listener and I was like the person my friends all come to but actually since doing it I've realised I probably wasn't such a good listener because I'd intervene with questions and always want to give advice but sometimes you can't and I've found like through doing this role like I can just listen and sometimes silences is what people need, just knowing that you're there. And it's helped me in my personal life massively but like you said at work because the extra roles I've taken on have really helped me with my time management and being organised and then having to talk to volunteers about them completing certain duties it's given me a bit more assertiveness as well I guess like a bit more confidence to approach conversations that I might not have done beforehand.

Beth  I know when I first started volunteering I hadn't as much work experience and some of the roles that you end up in as a volunteer are kind of situations where possibly in the workplace you wouldn't be put into unless you'd worked a bit longer, so I actually managed to experience some things where it gave me more skills that when I went to then try and get jobs I was able to say, "Well actually I have worked at a higher level," because when everyone's a volunteer everyone has to muck in and you don't have like a hierarchical level of, 'You don't do that!' or 'You do that.' So I ended up gaining skills that meant I could go to workplaces and say, "I actually have already done that. And I've worked in a big team and we've delivered this huge event," so that was quite good.
Well it sounds really interesting. When we spoke to OU students online actually we asked them a question earlier about whether they volunteer in their local community and I think Paul’s got a few responses from people who are telling us about what they do so we wanted to give them a bit of a shout out since it’s volunteering week.

Paul And we got loads of responses which was really good and here’s a few of them. So Zandra is a befriender for young people with cystic fibrosis and also before that volunteered as a dance teacher at a local school.

Verity Oh that's cool.

Paul Emma volunteers in the DT department of the local secondary school.

Sammi I bet that's good fun.

Paul And Natalia has volunteered in a ballet class. And a bit further down, Lisa is a unit leader at the local Rainbow and Brownie units.

Verity Oh my friend does that.

Beth Yeah they're all volunteer led aren't they, at guides and things like that?

Paul Ken volunteers escorting patients to hospital. Louise is a volunteer transcriber at the National Library of Wales, which is interesting.

Sammi There's a real variety there isn't there?

Verity But all these are comments. All these as well if you think if we didn’t have volunteers fulfilling those roles so little would get done in communities.

Sammi The country would fall apart without volunteers.

Beth Yeah definitely.

Sammi When you think of like St Johns Ambulance as well a lot of those are volunteers.

Beth Yeah. Well that's great and also seeing so many students volunteering on top of studying is just so impressive...

Verity Amazing.
Beth ...especially as we know that people are working and all sorts. And I think I always just make sure I find time to fit it in, like you say if you’re watching TV then you could be out there doing something else and helping someone in your community. So yeah that’s it from us, make sure you comment, tell us what you’re doing, tell us what you’re up to and also in the future have a look out because we are launching student-led projects where you’re going to be able to get involved with your Students Association in your local areas to improve things for other people who will benefit from a little bit of time that you could put in. All right?

Verity Great.

Beth So that’s bye from us, everyone.

Sammi Thank you.

Verity Bye

Beth See ya!