



WANTED MEN

THERE IS A SEVERE SHORTAGE OF MEN VOLUNTEERING FOR CHARITY WORK. IS THIS DUE TO MALE FEARS OF INTIMACY, OR IS SOCIETY JUST TOO SUSPICIOUS? JO CAIRD INVESTIGATES A TOUCHY SUBJECT

For successful TV actor Cal Macaninch, from the hit show *Holby Blue*, a last-minute decision he made at a party to volunteer for charity proved a life-changing experience.

Macaninch was not told until his volunteering period started that he would be accompanying a client of the deaf-blind charity Sense on a holiday to Center Parcs, but now he looks back on the week as "extraordinary" and a huge learning curve.

"You worry about your concerns in the world, and suddenly you're listening so hard to hear what someone else's concerns are. That was amazingly rewarding and liberating," he told *The Big Issue*.

However, Macaninch is one of an increasingly small minority – male volunteers – the shortage of which is causing a severe deficit within many charities that are desperate for their help.

Tom Madders, a former Sense employee now working for Mencap, the learning disability charity, says that in his experience, "there have always been more women volunteers than men and they're always struggling to find men at the last minute".

Malcolm Matthews, head of community services and information at Sense, explains the problems that arise as a result of under-representation: "We try to have gender-sensitive personal care. But given the disproportions, we're not able to do that."

Mark Restall, head of information at Volunteering England, an organisation that supports volunteering throughout the country, adds: "Young males may need strong role models. A lack of men available for such roles means that organisations and their clients lose out."

At Sense, for example, most of the deaf-blind holidaymakers require a volunteer each, as well

as an experienced leader who accompanies the group. Over half of Sense holidaymakers are male, but men only account for 21 per cent of volunteers.

The problem, although a familiar one to those working in the charity sector, was brought to wider attention just over a month ago, when NCH, the children's charity, and the volunteer group Chance UK published the results of a survey on volunteering with children. The results are particularly revealing when it comes to male attitudes to volunteering. According to the research, 69 per cent of men don't volunteer to work with children and young people.

There is clearly an issue here, but the results of the survey only go so far to explain why men are so hesitant to volunteer in caring roles with vulnerable individuals.

Of the men surveyed, 13 per cent who don't volunteer with children said they worry they will be seen as paedophiles. Seventeen per cent >>>

don't volunteer because they don't want to have their criminal records checked, but this is precisely the mechanism that ensures the safety of both the volunteer and the person being cared for.

Those working in the charity sector agree that the central issue is one of gender stereotyping. Men who volunteer for care roles may be regarded with suspicion because nurturing is traditionally seen as women's work. There is also hesitancy about taking on a role that involves such levels of physical intimacy.

The problem is one of perception, rather than reality. In response to the survey, Mark Restall said: "We are concerned to hear that some people may be put off volunteering through such ungrounded fears. Criminal record checks need to be handled carefully to ensure that potential volunteers understand that this is a standard procedure to help safeguard vulnerable people.

"Everybody going into such roles will go through the checks, which are treated confidentially, and there is no automatic culture of suspicion every time a man walks through the door."

As a charity, Sense also places great emphasis on volunteers being aware of the potential risks that accompany working with vulnerable individuals.

Matthews explains: "We try to engender an environment where people are not fearful... it's about people working together as a team to ensure that everybody is safe and seen to be safe."

On occasion, these issues do come to a head, Matthews says. "Every year, someone will raise

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a concern about what happens on a holiday and it's dealt with immediately because of the sort of [protective] environment that we've created." But the charity has never had to involve the police in any situation of this kind.

The difficulty is that in any caring role, there will be times when what we think of as 'normal' personal space barriers must be crossed.

For instance, the man with whom Cal Macaninch went on holiday 'hears' by holding the throat of the person talking to him and feeling the vibrations from their vocal chords.

The public reaction to the sight of a large man attached to a woman's [in this case the group leader's] throat, screaming his head off, was often concern. "We were stopped many times," he recalls.

Madders has also had to deal with people making incorrect assumptions when he was paired with a deaf-blind 16-year-old with severe learning difficulties and incontinence. "If you're at a bowling alley and you're holding a 16-year-old by the hand and walking into the toilets, you're going to get looks."

There is no easy solution to this problem. Until charities succeed in recruiting more male volunteers, the voluntary sector will continue to be dominated by women, and the perception that caring roles are exclusively for women will persist.

Restall is very clear about the negative implications of this Catch-22 situation. "A lack of diversity alienates organisations from the communities in which they work and obviously excludes people from getting involved. Volunteering should be an inclusive activity."

All the men I spoke to gave me a resounding 'yes' when asked if they would recommend volunteering to other men and volunteer again themselves.

Matthews says the feedback gained from volunteers after the holidays is overwhelmingly positive, with 99 per cent saying that they feel they made a positive contribution.

The challenge for charities is to change people's perceptions about working with children and vulnerable adults. Do this and you open up a whole range of possibilities. As Macaninch remarks: "You will see the world differently once you've done something like this."

For information on these organisations, go to:
Volunteering England: 0845 305 6979;
www.volunteering.org.uk
Chance UK: 020-7281 5858;
www.chanceuk.com
Sense: 020-7561 3384; www.sense.org.uk
Mencap: 020-7454 0454; www.mencap.org.uk
NCH: 08457 626579; www.nch.org.uk

