

Julie Davis, Blowfly Cricket

1. Why did you start volunteering?

I left the workforce at 65 and moved to Central Coast looking forward to a future of sleeping in, playing bowls, maybe learning bridge – just doing whatever I wanted.

After 2 weeks I was bored and decided I would become a volunteer and do something positive. I remembered when I was a teenager I volunteered at the Wahroonga Spastic (cerebral palsy) Centre on Sundays assisting some children eating their lunch and the joy I felt when I received a smile.

2. How and where did you start volunteering?

In 2014 I headed off to the local community centre. I was amazed at the diversity of volunteering work. I settled on Mary Macs (cooking and assisting homeless people with lunches). I met the loveliest volunteers and homeless people. I became aware of their history, hard times and in some cases their abuse of drugs and alcohol very early on in their lives.

One lovely memory was when one of the men was going to his daughter's wedding and he had been to Vinnies to get a suit and shirt and had asked if I would help making them fit. I had a little sewing background so was more than happy to assist, I told him his clothes were ready and where could I drop them off. He informed me he lived in his car so I met him and handed them over. Yes he certainly did live in the car – not much room for the driver. The next week he arrived with a big smile and a bunch of roses for me (from Woolworths \$5 tag). I was so moved it was as if I had just been given a huge bouquet of flowers.

Over that time I visited a couple of the men when they were in Gosford Hospital. One had been in a fight, had no clothes but it was the first time I had ever had a sober conversation with him. He used to play Rugby in the Lismore area, had been born with intellectual difficulties, lived with his lovely Mum. When Mum died his sister arrived and put him out and he had been homeless ever since. When he was coming out of hospital I visited Lowes to buy him some clothes (size extra extra large). He loved the clothes but eventually they were stolen as when the homeless go to sleep quite often their belonging get taken. He died just over 12 months later with a heart attack and I was truly sad.

I also volunteered to run a very slow calling bingo at Fairhaven Services on Friday afternoon for adults with disabilities – I would bring a plate of something different each week for afternoon tea. There were no prizes and each take back to their lodgings a small bag of mixed sweets. I loved this group, they all had severe disabilities and most have a carer with them. I loved hearing about their week. When in shopping centres and I see a person that is different I make eye contact and give a big smile and hello and more often than not I get a big smile back. Prior to volunteering I am not even sure if I noticed them.

3. How and why did you start volunteering with BlowFly Cricket?

In January 2015 on ABC TV I saw a video production "*BlowFly cricket giving kids with autism*". As I have a grandson (then aged 10) and on the spectrum I was

very interested. On the internet, after searching various bugs and cricket, BlowFly Cricket appeared and I phoned Mark Rushton and he said to come and check it out at Hornsby on the following Saturday. That was the beginning of my addiction to these amazing children, their siblings and parents.

4. How did you support BlowFly Cricket? What were some of the roles and responsibilities you had

Within three weeks of attending my first appearance at BlowFly Cricket I with 11 others underwent Cricket Community Coaching Course. Through BlowFly Cricket I attended with the founder of BlowFly Cricket (Mark Rushton who is a paraplegic) 2 south coast schools for children with disabilities – each school we did a coaching clinic of 2 hours one day a week for 8 weeks. I became aware of the stress parents lived with 24/7 and just how unique each child was. Once trust is established the joy they bring is wonderful. In December 2015 Mark Rushton won NSW Volunteer of the Year and our team won NSW Volunteer Team of the Year.

Responsibilities for me on a Saturday afternoon were to arrive at James Park Hornsby, open up cricket shed. I would walk around oval to make sure no bottles, glass or needles present. When families arrived helped then set up cricket for afternoon. I loved assisting with the cricket session. As more volunteers joined I was able to take some of the little brothers and sisters of Blowies over to the nets to keep them occupied so they stayed safe from the cricket session.

As I was slowly aging I assisted less and with now two more grandchildren needing assistance I volunteered when I could with the BlowFly Bunnings Barbecues and assisted Mark with the Sony Foundation vacation sessions at St Andrews College (Sydney University) and Shore and PLC schools. The Sony Foundation run training sessions for students at University and some Schools for their students to participate in giving parents of children with severe disabilities respite for a couple of days towards the end of each year. I loved working with these students stressing that these children with disabilities weren't necessarily going to do anything you asked them to do to start with – but again a smile is a great result and it gives parents a break from 24/7 stress.

5. What were some of the challenges working with Volunteers, BlowFly participants and their families?

No challenges with volunteers and families. I had so much to learn regarding patience and the 24/7 hours stress many families faced. Just watching new families arrive, very nervous that their child may not fit in, and see them relax over the following weeks and make friends. I was amazed at the siblings of those with challenges assisted with the group and became super volunteers themselves. These siblings also met other family members and could share their own stories. I felt this BlowFly challenge for me was going to prepare me to be a really great grandmother (and it has – my grandson has just completed his Higher School Certificate with the help of a scribe and half-hourly breaks). I have learnt patience and how to find a way into my grandson's wonderful quirky mind.

I have found friendship with the Blowies so rewarding and am amazed at the trust and love I received, from littlies to the older Blowies.

6. What were some of the success stories you remember?

Children over the years developing self-confidence, showing caring to each other, becoming amazing cricketers and many becoming coaches and mentors to new children. Remembering parents on their first day worrying about tomato sauce dribbling down their child's chin and a couple of weeks later relaxing with "no big deal".

Coaching Clinics: 8 2 hour sessions:

Mary Brooks School – Campbelltown – On my last day when I was assisting the sports mistress handling out BlowFly Medals – one child (15) put his arm around my shoulders from the stage and called out to his mother, "Mum, this is Julie" followed by an arm pointing to his mother "that's my mother", whereupon the mother then said to me "Julie we have heard so much about you".

Les Powell School – Mt Pritchard – I worked with Kevork (aged around 15, legally blind, under 4 feet tall and very fragile). I bowled hundreds of balls, with bells inside, to Kevork over the 8 weeks and Kevork was able to bat to these balls as his advanced hearing enabled him to hear the ball approaching. When Kevork hit the ball with force and he could hear the ball rolling had passed me he would clap his hands with joy. At the final session I got down on my knees to thank Kevork and give him his medal he said "Julie you are very very proud of me aren't you". I was so glad Kevork could not see the tears in my eyes as it might have taken away his huge smile.

James Park – Hornsby – Saturday afternoons during summer.

This one is a personal memory: Two years at the Australian Test Cricket match after Christmas I have taken a small group of BlowFly cricketers to the SCG with two other coaches where the children have been invited out onto the field at half time. One time it was rained out and the children and I were invited to the press room to meet some of the members of the Australian Cricket team – they were great and the children asked them all sorts of weird and interesting questions. The last time I was there we had Glen McGrath throwing and catching the balls to the children in front of the members stand and I got a big hug, kiss and a thank you from Glen. Cricket Australia and Cricket NSW are huge supporters of BlowFly Cricket.

7. What did you learn from volunteering?

Patience, friendship and knowing I am making a difference.

8. What kept you coming back to BlowFly? How does BlowFly support its volunteers?

It is truly addictive.

Definitely the founder, Mark Ruston. Mark does not believe in "no" nor does he believe that some things are not possible. Mark has never criticised any BlowFly or volunteer and supports all volunteers and is willing to accept whatever time each volunteer can give and he is always available on a personal level for all volunteers. You don't have to know anything about cricket to become a volunteer.

9. What do you think of other organisations can learn from BlowFly?

- Respect all volunteers
- Keep gathering volunteers - there is always a variety of positions available – you can never have enough
- Encourage volunteers to respect each other
- Never say a job can't be done
- Keep all donors of money and goods up to date with BlowFly decisions

10. What would you say to someone interested in volunteering?

You will never be the same again – your life will be enriched, you will have a purpose outside your family, your mental health will improve and you will have friendships for life.

11. How has the Centre for Volunteering supported you in your volunteering?

In June 2019 I attended a Volunteering NSW 2019 State Conference. Various workshops were provided from 9am and 5pm. I was able to witness just how NSW financially benefited from the Centre for Volunteering.

One workshop run by Tuisi van de Graaf, then Partner, Brave People Solutions – topics covered were:

- Self -awareness
- Self-regulation
- Acknowledgement, appreciation and praise
- Empathy
- Settling clear values and expectations.