

Your future, your way

Spare time on your hands? **Sam Chalk** talks to some volunteers that make the most of their every day, while making a real difference to their community.

It's a Sunday morning and it's raining. It's the last day of the weekend and most people want to relax and make the most of it before going back to work. Not if you're Farah Ikbal.

Farah joined a team running for the Muslim Youth Helpline at the British 10K marathon. Thousands of people completed the race, many running for charities and raising money for good causes. Farah was one of many doing her bit but her story isn't as simple as that. She had only recently joined the Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) as a volunteer after finding out about the organisation at a networking event run by the project Futures. Futures is based in London and Greater Manchester and matches over 25's with volunteering opportunities to suit their own goals and interests. Farah explains: "I wanted to volunteer simply because I really wanted to help others. I felt that the experiences I've had in my life would help me to sympathise with others and give them the strength to deal with their own problems so, after chatting to a project coordinator who gave me some help and advice, I decided that volunteering for MYH was just what I was looking for."

MYH is a charity providing a free and confidential listening support service to



young Muslims in the UK, dealing with a range of issues from mental illness to family difficulties, so prior to working for them, volunteers are interviewed and then trained.

Farah only heard about the 10K race a week before it was happening. She hadn't done any training and although it's not recommended, she was keen to raise money for MYH; so she took it easy by jogging and walking to the finish line, raising £300 for the charity in the process.

MYH have benefitted from the money raised by the team who ran the 10K but equally as important is the time the volunteers give. Today it seems we have less and less time with commitments to work and family, but this failed to deter Farah. Indeed her story is an inspiring one: "I have a seven year old son who has Dyskeratosis Congenita, a rare progressive bone marrow failure syndrome which is extremely life threatening," she explains. "Dean is currently on the waiting list for a bone marrow, neither I nor my family and friends are a match and unfortunately, of the 13 million people on the bone marrow register, none of them are a match for Dean either. Obviously, looking after Dean is my top priority but I feel it's really important to help others too, so it's a juggling act but it can be done."

Many people like Farah volunteer for a cause they feel strongly about but may do it to fulfil personal goals. Research shows that in 2007, three quarters of all adults in England had volunteered, formally or informally at least once in the 12 months leading up to the research, with 48% having volunteered at least once a month.

Giving some time can help your local community but it could change your life for the better too. Yusuf Tai, one of the Futures Project Coordinators, points out the benefits: "Whilst giving your time, you



can achieve many personal ambitions. The opportunities are varied which means that it could help to improve your CV, gain new skills or meet new people. Research even shows that employers value the experience volunteering provides. Nearly half of all employers thought employees who did voluntary work have a better chance of a pay rise due to the new skills they are learning.”

Mizanur Rahman was studying for a computer science degree which he became disinterested in. He got involved in volun-

tary Muslim youth work and found he was passionate about it. Now he volunteers for MYH, with the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC) and for a number of up and coming Muslim magazines, to help him achieve his goal of making a career of Muslim youth work. “Volunteering is an excellent opportunity for people who’ve ended up in professions or degrees which don’t match their own personal interests, to try something else. For me, the best thing about volunteering is the diversity of community

initiatives you can get involved in. There’s so much going on; you can help make a difference to your community and to society on a larger scale whilst meeting new people and developing your skills in the process.”

For Usman, an IT professional who emigrated from Pakistan four years ago, Futures gave him the opportunity of helping others achieve their goals. He got involved in the prison campaign, an annual campaign which sends Eid gifts to young Muslim offenders across the UK, organised by MYH. “Being involved in the prison campaign allowed me to do my bit to support these young people, who don’t always receive any support from their families and are often shunned by their communities, resulting in a high rate of re-offending. Meeting so many enthusiastic people enjoying getting involved also gave me the desire to do more.”

With the wish to do more, Usman also volunteered with Mosaic, which is part of the Prince’s Trust. “I’m a mentor for young people in a pretty deprived area,” he explains. “Mentoring involves discussing issues they have and trying to support and encourage them with their goals. Some feel that there are so many obstacles, they might as well give up. As mentors we try to show them that you need to be positive, work with setbacks and look at alternatives. I had so many questions when I was younger, it would have helped me to have a mentor. I’d like to give something to these young people that I didn’t have.”

Volunteering is a big part of Usman’s life now, and he expresses his happiness at being able to do something for his community. “Working in a stressful job doesn’t leave a lot of time and it can be draining, but it’s all about priorities. Volunteering actually helps my work; I forget about the stresses of the day and it gives you positive energy. Meeting people from so many backgrounds has given me perspective on my own life too. I’ve realised how much you can help others just by giving your time and being you. I must admit, it is a good feeling, but the best thing is the difference it can make to someone else’s life.” ●

For more information on how to get involved in volunteering visit www.futuresproject.co.uk or call Tagreed in London on 0870 774 3518 or Yusuf in Manchester on 0161 273 6615.