

## **A review of my placement at The Dining Room - six months in, Part II**

**By**

**Neal Taylor**

### **Volunteering**

**Self Rated:** ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆

There are several ways to volunteer at The Dining Room. From the team in the kitchen, preparing and serving the meals, to the floor volunteers waiting on the seated Guests and volunteers, and to the many volunteers seated amongst the Guests, sharing a meal, conversation and a table. Kitchen volunteers have very little contact with the guests, while all other volunteers spend the entire time at The Dining Room intimately involved with the Guests. Seated volunteers spend the evening listening to the Guests at their table as well as sharing a meal and conversation. Sometimes, the focus can be only on one Guest, as their need to share and be heard may be more evident and urgent than others at that table.

When I began as a volunteer, I had no idea what to expect. I did believe that the Guests were the typical smelly old men in rags and immediately had that challenged upon my first night (where ironically, I did sit with a couple of guys who did fit that description!), with a myriad of people as Guests, ranging from old men to families and babies. At first nervous about talking with Guests, I now enjoy talking to Guests, old and new, and have no hesitation in engaging them. Communication and sharing with the other volunteers is also important.

Overall I would say that I am improving in all areas of general volunteering. I have made some great strides and changes since beginning but believe that I have a much to improve on, especially with developing finer listening skills, as well as the underlying skills required to “read” people behind the rhetoric. This comes by training and experience. In addition, my communication skills have improved, but I am of the belief that they are always developing when interacting with others.

### **The Helping Course**

**Self Rated:** ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆

Volunteers who remain are required to undertake the Helping Course that David Knoop runs, where volunteers are equipped with basic listening skills as well as a focus on the Guests’ pain and not their problems. Over the course of an evening a week over a few weeks, volunteers communication skills are refined as well as providing a focus for the volunteering beyond “helping” to caring.

This course is invaluable and should be required for all volunteers and folk that work with broken and fragile people in welfare, from churches to parachurch organisations. The course focussed many skills that I had as well as equipping me with some micro-skills that are continually used when sharing with Guests. Having completed the course, it was a bonus and challenge to have such a confrontational role-play that I felt was headed nowhere fast while I kept trying to calm both men down! That, itself, was invaluable, as was the critique offered afterwards by David and from volunteers doing the course. While I did pass the course, I believe I have learnt much but have much to learn and would say that the Helping Course has been one of the many “benefits” of the placement.

## **Team Care Worker**

**Self Rated:** ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

This is a role that is somewhat unique to The Dining Room. The role requires one volunteer to oversee, not as a position of management, but as a position of caring for the other volunteers who serve at The Dining Room. Over the course of the evening The Team Care Worker reaches all the volunteers and checks up on their welfare. This can range from a simple touch on the shoulder, to a conversation with the volunteer about their interaction with Guests. All volunteers are advised that the Team Care Worker is there for them to ensure their safety and well-being during the night.

Finally, the Team Care Worker leads the final discussion after the cleaning and tidy-up. This discussion is structured and all volunteers who attend are encouraged to share how they are feeling about the evening as well as share any issues or observations of a Guest that they feel is needed to be shared. This is volunteer time and any concerns from volunteers are encouraged to be shared.

The position of Team Care Worker is currently shared amongst three volunteers, including myself. I consider it an honour to be the Team Care Worker, and find that the position gives me chance to get to know the volunteers and Guests alike during the evening. Again I would argue that while I have the basic skills and abilities to do this task, there is still much to do, and many skills to learn. This will come in time with experience, and builds with each week, with the variance of volunteers on the schedule.

## **Wanderer/Greeter**

**Self Rated:** ★★★☆☆☆☆☆☆

Finally this is a role that involves working closely with David Knoop. This role requires complete attention on the Guests, not only as individuals but as a collective, whole, living and complex crowd of humanity. The role is to oversee the whole Dining Room, with each Guest greeted individually with a handshake and clasp or brief hug. This serves to say to each Guest that you are valuable and welcome, but also allows the mood of the Guests to be observed, heading off any potential problems. The role is very demanding and intensive, with the necessity to keep track of individuals and the mood of The Dining Room.

Having just started this role a few weeks back, I was given the opportunity to perform the role while David was away. Apprehensive enough about missing something or not believing that I could deal with an issue suitably anyway (lack of experience), the night was a challenge and went smoothly, without the feared problems arising. Steep learning curve! While it was quiet, there were a couple of minor issues and people to keep track of. This is a very difficult role that I feel I am just scratching the surface of. While I enjoy and love this role, it is one that I feel I have much to learn and grow in.

**My Self-Assessment:** Good to Very Good

**David Knoops Assessment:** Very Good to Excellent

**Scale Used:** Excellent/Very Good/Good/Not so Good/Poor