

True Friendships through the IHC Volunteer programme

IHC NZ has been a driving force over the past 60 years in improving the lives of people with an intellectual disability. Julie Elmer is the IHC Volunteer Coordinator based in Hamilton, who coordinates the IHC Volunteer Programme in the Waikato.

This volunteer programme is about one-to-one friendship in the community. The flexibility of the programme enables you to do the activities you like, when you like to do them, alongside a person with an intellectual disability. Each person in the volunteer programme is matched with someone who shares similar interests to them. A volunteer needs to be able to commit to meeting regularly (ideally weekly) with their friend, so that the friendship and routine is established.

“By taking a moment to connect with someone with an intellectual disability, you can make a positive change in someone’s life and a new friend in the process” says Julie.

More than 2 years ago, Camilla Carty-Melis and Gail Longley were partnered together in the IHC volunteer programme. Camilla joined the programme as she was new to New Zealand, and it seemed a like good opportunity to help someone, to meet people, and to introduce her young daughter Fern to people from diverse backgrounds. What Camilla found through volunteering was a friendship that was mutually beneficial, and so much more than volunteering.

“In spending time with Gail I have never laughed so much, we just have a lot of fun” says Camilla

Gail and Camilla spend time going on trips around the Waikato, going to events, and having coffee catch ups, walks and dinners. They are both discovering the Waikato together. Camilla said she didn’t really know what to expect from joining the volunteer programme, but a real friendship has developed and her whole family knows Gail now.

“I no longer feel like a volunteer, we have a real friendship. Gail integrated really well into my life, and we are doing things together that I would have done otherwise, it is just more fun to do with someone else” says Camilla.

Many people with an intellectual disability find that the people they spend time with are paid staff and family. They do not necessarily have friends of their choice who share similar interests, and who they are able to do things with together within the community.

Gail has also really valued the friendship she has made with Camilla through the IHC Volunteer Programme.

“I like having a volunteer friend to go and do things with. It makes the time fly by and we do all sorts of things. Day trips and going for coffee and walks round the lake and movie nights if it is raining. We have a lot of laughs!”

The IHC Volunteer programme is currently looking for more volunteers to match with people seeking friends. They need people with varied interests and activities, ranging from planes, trains and photography, to movie and sport watching, walks, cafes, shopping and site seeing. New volunteers are provided with a full orientation and learning programme, and ongoing support from the volunteer coordinator.

If you would like to volunteer or be provided with more information, please contact Julie Elmer on ph 834 7219 or visit www.ihc.org.nz