



# ‘Volunteering changed my life’

Elaine Wilkinson spent 11 years working in a sandwich shop. It provided regular money and a great social scene, but it was never going to be anything more. Then she tried volunteering, and it changed her life...

## Looking at life differently

“Reaching my 40th birthday I started to look at my life differently,” says Elaine. “What was I going to get from this job? Friends were retiring after 20 years with no thank you, no pension.

“My daughter was talking about working there when she left school but I wanted more for her, and to set a better example. My mum was also very ill and needed a lot of care so I decided to finish work to look after her. It gave me time to think about where I was going with my life.

“I made a claim for benefits but continued to work on Saturdays. I was paid £30 for a six-hour shift but my benefits were reduced by £20 so I would only walk away with £10. For me it was about the social interaction, feeling useful and setting an example to my daughter.

## Inspired to volunteer

“I got myself into debt and had bailiffs at the door. It was a distressing time. I went to an advice centre, where I met Cathy, who changed my life. She stood up for my rights and helped me so much. I had such admiration I wanted to do for others what she did for me. I emailed the Centre and told them that Cathy had inspired me to volunteer and learn more about the advice service. I had an email back which said they were looking for volunteers.

“I had to apply, and the interview was the hardest I have had in my career. But it showed me that they took the positions seriously. I was successful and it was a fantastic

time. I was making progress. I volunteered for one day a week, worked in the shop for one day and the rest of the time I looked after my mum. I volunteered for 18 months, gaining a qualification in welfare benefits and advice work. They invested a lot in me and it meant a lot to see that they valued me because of the effort I put in.

“I gained self-respect, and respect from others. After 18 months I enrolled on debt specialist training where the trainer must have seen something in me. She offered me a three-month full-time contract in 2006. I never looked back! My temporary contract got extended and then I was offered a salaried full time position.

## Stop wishing; start doing!

While volunteering I wasn’t financially better off, but I could see how it would benefit me in the future and put me in a better position than working in the shop. Since leaving I’ve become a qualified debt advisor and have teaching qualifications.

“I occasionally go back to the sandwich shop and they often say to me they wish they had had the courage to leave. My advice to anyone who wants to better themselves, get a better job or try something new is to stop wishing you could sort your life out, and actually sort your life out by doing something about it now.”

**Elaine now works as a full time Financial Inclusion Officer at City South.**