

To the School Volunteer Program of the ACT

It takes a village to raise a child. Equally importantly, it takes a child to create a village.

Humans survive by cooperating. There has never been a generation that hasn't faced disaster, be it pandemic, volcano, war, financial collapse or a stampeding mob of woolly mammoths. There has been no time when our quality of life, and even our very existence, hasn't depended not just on our ability to work together, but that, as humans, we are at our most fulfilled when we help others.

Years ago, soon after I had first met Holocaust survivor Olga Horek, we met again at the Jewish Museum where she is a regular volunteer, and I had been asked to speak. I learned that - after a life of surmounting tragedy that most of us can only dimly comprehend- she had just suffered a deep personal loss. Yet she was there, to speak to hundreds of children, to inspire them with the integrity and compassion needed if we, as a species, are to continue. I hesitantly tried to express my admiration for her continuing to speak, despite her pain and anguish. She took my hands and said 'Darling, if I did not do this, I would not survive.'

She was there for the children, as you are there, for the children.

The love of children, the desire to protect them, the joy in seeing them grow and surmount difficulties, is the deepest instinct of all. Without it, we, as a species, do not survive. The luckiest, most blessed people have learned that they too are happiest helping kids thrive, and most especially, working together, for children.

This is not to say it's easy. At every award ceremony someone is described as a 'tireless advocate/teacher/help for children'. I have never met one. I'm not even sure they exist. Everyone who works with kids is often very tired indeed. Flopping in a chair gasping 'give me coffee, give me cake' tired. Weeping tired, sometimes, when the problems seem so many, and the kids in so much need.

It is never easy.

It is always wonderful.

There is a reason volunteers live longer; are happier on every measurement scale, and even have fewer sick days with the flu. (The data for all of that is somewhere in New Scientist).

Working with kids creates a village. Thank you for the honour and the privilege of joining yours.



Jackie French AM

Author, Historian, Ecologist, Honorary Wombat

Senior Australian of the Year, 2015, Australian Children's Laureate 2014-15

Ambassador National Centre for Australian Children's Literature,