

# Using your skill set to give back

Consider your strengths and interests when looking for volunteer opportunities

**JACQUELINE KOVACS**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Sandra Chapnik recently retired after more than 24 years as an Ontario Superior Court Judge, but she has no intention of retiring from involvement in the community. “It has always been important for me to give back,” Chapnik said. “Being involved in community service is part of who I always wanted to be and part of who I still am.”

That’s why throughout her career — from teacher to lawyer to judge — Chapnik has always volunteered her time. But now that she has more time on her hands, Chapnik said she’s “filling in the blanks, trying to find the causes that mean the most to me and that I can bring the most to.”

That approach is bang-on, according to Paula Speevak, president and CEO of Volunteer Canada, an Ottawa-based national organization that researches volunteering trends, and creates tools and resources for more than 220 volunteer centres across the country. “Successful volunteering,” Speevak said, “is a two-way relationship: it needs to work for the community’s needs and your needs.”

Community centres across the country can help you determine both sets of needs, she added. “You can explore what you care about,” Speevak said, “and look at volunteering opportunities in light of your own passions and interests.” Otherwise, she warned, that initial thrill of helping out and being involved in something new will tend to lose its appeal.

Because of her deep-seated interests in education and law, for example, Chapnik has volunteered with the Women’s Law Association of Ontario, where she served as president, and with World ORT Toronto, an organization dedicated to supporting education for disadvantaged youth. “You get more satisfaction out of the giving of your time than they



JONATHAN NICHOLLS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Retired Ontario Superior Court Judge Sandra Chapnik found her skill set an asset when volunteering for the Women’s Law Association of Ontario.

get from you,” she says.

Got some time and experience to share? Here are some things to consider about volunteering during your retirement years.

#### **It feels good. Literally**

“When we’re doing good for others, there is a chemical reaction in the body,” Speevak said. “They call it a ‘helper’s high.’ We feel good about doing good.” That high helps relieve stress, which can impact stress-related illnesses, such as high blood pressure.

#### **It’s good for your mental health**

“There are proven social and health

benefits to volunteering,” Speevak said. “You’re not socially isolated; you feel connected to the community.” That results in decreased symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as increased self esteem. “It’s important to stay connected. We’re social beings. When you volunteer and connect with others who share your values, it’s a specific kind of social engagement.”

#### **It can help you through big life changes**

Whether it’s retirement, downsizing and moving to a new neighbourhood or the loss of a partner, major life changes bring stress — and volun-

teering can help people get through the transition. With downsizing and moving, for instance, getting involved gets you out in your new neighbourhood and connecting with others in the community — all while doing good for those around you.

#### **There’s something for everyone**

Local volunteer centres around the country have databases with hundreds of opportunities. It’s just a matter of finding one that suits you. Let’s say you’re an avid gardener, but now you’ve sold the family home and moved to a condo, there’s not much scope for gardening. Why not volunteer at a community garden? You can

teach other budding green thumbs a thing or two as well as satisfy your love of all things botanical.

If in retirement, you were looking forward to spending more time with your family, look into how volunteering might fit in.

You could pitch in at your grandchild’s school, for example, for hot-lunch days or reading to younger grades.

Outdoorsy types may like to lead tweens on hikes through your local community centre. Or kick your contribution up a notch and get your family volunteering with you — you’ll have time together, doing good and feeling great about it.