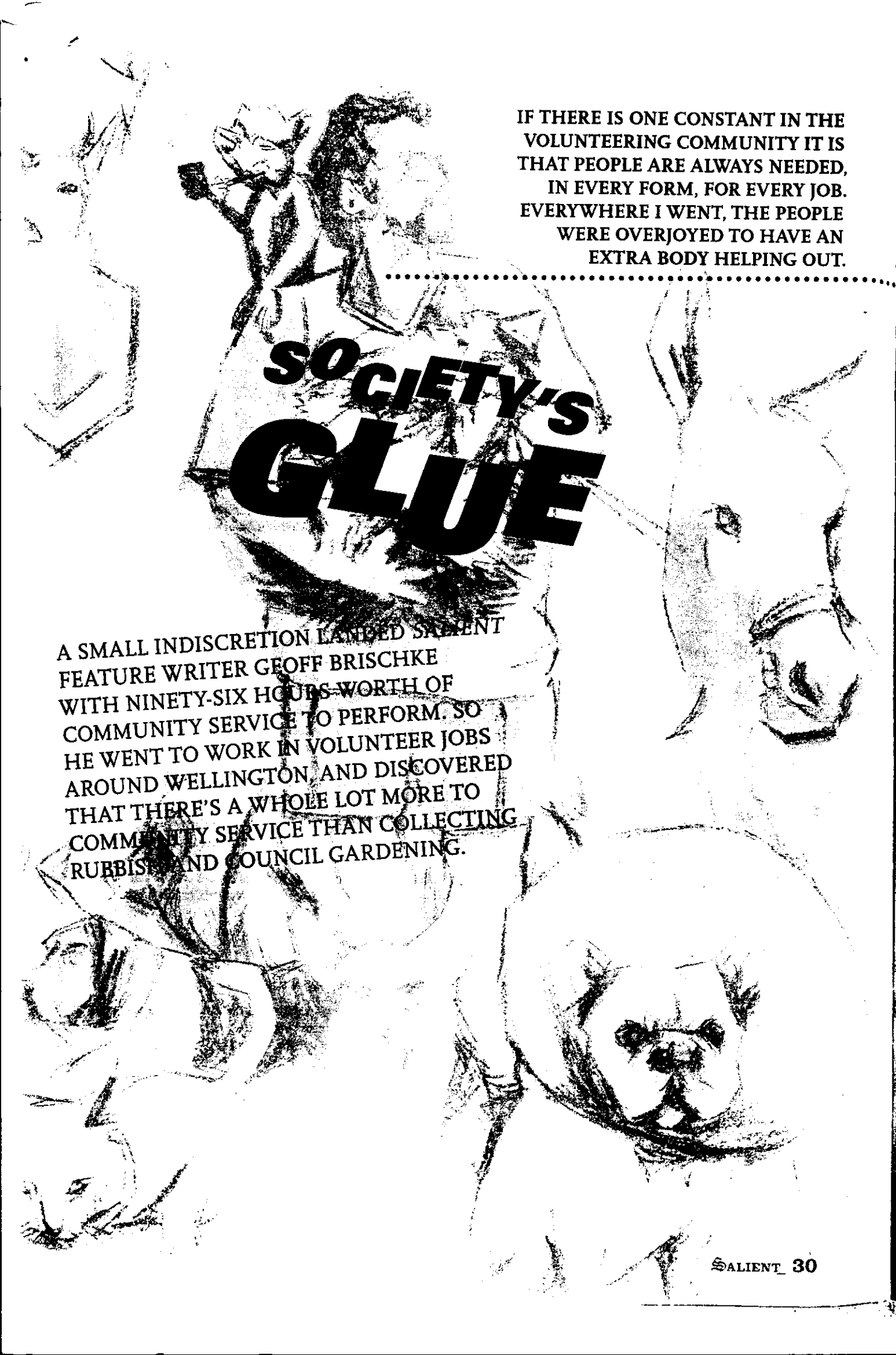

IF THERE IS ONE CONSTANT IN THE VOLUNTEERING COMMUNITY IT IS THAT PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS NEEDED, IN EVERY FORM, FOR EVERY JOB. EVERYWHERE I WENT, THE PEOPLE WERE OVERJOYED TO HAVE AN EXTRA BODY HELPING OUT.

SOCIETY'S GLUE

A SMALL INDISCRETION LANDED SALIENT FEATURE WRITER GEOFF BRISCHKE WITH NINETY-SIX HOURS WORTH OF COMMUNITY SERVICE TO PERFORM. SO HE WENT TO WORK IN VOLUNTEER JOBS AROUND WELLINGTON, AND DISCOVERED THAT THERE'S A WHOLE LOT MORE TO COMMUNITY SERVICE THAN COLLECTING RUBBISH AND COUNCIL GARDENING.

I was a naughty boy. Without going specifically into what I did, let's just say that it was naughty enough for the Arapahoe County Court in Aurora, Colorado to decide that I should provide the community with ninety-six hours of valuable voluntary service. They were nice enough to let me do this while I was away in New Zealand, anything I wanted, as long as it was for a non-profit organisation. They were also nice enough to give me 365 days in which to finish. But I wasted about 340 of those days, so with three weeks to go I needed to do some hardcore voluntary work at just about any place that would take me.

And they all did. If there is one constant in the volunteering community it is that people are always needed, in every form, for every job. Everywhere I went, the people were overjoyed to have an extra body helping out: Cleaning up after the animals at the SPCA, recording community advertisements at Access Radio and serving tea to hungry people at the Suzanne Aubert Compassion Centre. I discovered, whether I wanted to or not, an entire underground workforce that does these things, and much more, out of the goodness of their own hearts, every day of the year. But my volunteering really wasn't. Community service is compulsory and I can't claim any measure of altruistic, I'm-doing-this-for-the-benefit-of-humanity kind of motive. I can't even claim any measure of thinly-veiled, self-gratification kind of motive. I was forced to do this. Before then I had given voluntary work a lot less thought than I had given, say, booger humour. I've never been a volunteering kind of person, but I found out that I could be; I found out eventually that I probably *should* be. I found out how important volunteering is to the community-at-large, how it keeps a community from falling apart at the edges.

FOR THE DOGS AT THE SPCA, BEING ABANDONED FOREVER IS EXACTLY WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THEM. WHILE WORKING THERE I OFTEN HEARD THE TERM 'SURRENDERED', AS IN, 'THESE ASSHOLES WHO HAD NO IDEA HOW MUCH RESPONSIBILITY A DOG WAS, SURRENDERED IT TO US'. I SUPPOSE IT'S TOO DEPRESSING TO FOCUS ON THE FACT THAT ALMOST EVERY ANIMAL IN THERE HAS BEEN ABANDONED BY A PERSON WHO ONCE LOVED IT.

I also found out where I should go the next time that I have to do some *more* community service. So, those of you first years who are already planning which specific piece of university property you're going to burn, steal, loot or disfigure, could benefit by paying attention - you wouldn't want to end up gathering cigarette butts on the thin shoulder of some coastal highway when you could just as easily be smoking them under the shade trees at Newtown Park. Also, for the decent human beings, you might find something that you'll want to get involved in yourself.

When I started looking for work the first place I called was the Salvation Army. I told them I needed to do some community service, and I could tell they were used to dealing with people under the same obligation as I was by what they told me they had available. They had an entire list of criminal-themed community work that needed to be done: Picking up rubbish, cutting down gorse, re-painting dilapidated buildings, and so on. I told them I would call them back. A quick Internet search put me on to Volunteer Wellington. It's a non-profit charitable trust that describes itself as "an employment agency for community organisations" and it's a focal point for voluntary work within the city. Scrolling through their online database gave me a little surprise as I saw just how rich the volunteering possibilities were in Wellington. There were the basic kinds of jobs that you would expect to do as a volunteer: Fundraising, data entry, gardening, helping out with children, the disabled and the elderly - but far more numerous than these were the kind of jobs that I had never thought of as being voluntary. Website design, marketing and promotions, writing, broadcasting, legal work, teaching, gallery hosts, artists, musicians, prison visitors and many, many more. But I soon learned that getting volunteer work isn't as easy as waltzing through the door and saying, 'Give me the name

of a prisoner and a ride to Tongariro'. Each prospective volunteer is interviewed and then matched with an organisation that has been vetted by Volunteer Wellington. Pauline Harper, a co-manager at the centre, explained the process and what her organisation does:

"A volunteer centre, which we are, is central to the various aspects that are volunteering. We have many roles: recruitment and referral, making sure the referrals are as appropriate as possible, and training organisations that use volunteers as a significant part of their workforce to ensure that their programmes are conducive to good experiences for volunteers. [Volunteers] are interviewed before being referred, it takes up to an hour [...] The interview process gives people the chance to think it through and work it out, to decide what their goals are and what they want to get out of volunteering." Volunteer Wellington refers about 1400 people a year to over 330 different community organisations, a tiny proportion of which are offenders working off a community service tab. Here I was, feeling good about myself because I was sitting in a volunteering centre, and Harper bursts my bubble: "Technically speaking, that can sometimes be seen as not volunteering, you *have* to do it. Nevertheless, we do have a policy that if people come willingly up our stairs we will take them. We don't have very many, they usually go through their probation officer, but sometimes they say 'we have been thinking about doing something like this for a long time and now we actually have to'. It could be a turning point."

I still wasn't sure that I really wanted to do any voluntary work, or reach a turning point either, for that matter. But it needed to be done, so, armed with a handful of referrals, I went out into the volunteer world.

Walking into the dog run at the Wellington SPCA at 8am, the first thing you notice is the overpowering smell of shit and fur. The pens are a mess; the dogs have been alone since 5 the previous day and have been busy ripping apart their blankets, mutilating their toys and crapping in their cages. The minute they see a person they go wild. Dogs are not the brightest creatures in the world and getting left behind at the end of the day is a very traumatic experience for them. You can see it in their faces, you can tell they are thinking 'I've been abandoned forever', even though this same event happens at the same time *every* day. So when you come back in the morning... I don't think any of us has ever felt the unabated joy a dog feels when its human returns. But for the dogs at the SPCA, being abandoned forever is exactly what has happened to them. While working there I often heard the term 'surrendered', as in, 'these assholes who had no idea how much responsibility a dog was, *surrendered* it to us'. I suppose it's too depressing to focus on the fact that almost every animal in there has been abandoned by a person who once loved it.

The SPCA had everything: Dogs, puppies, kittens, cats, mice, birds, rabbits and rats. They even had one lonely turtle that spent its day staring into the corner of a small, water-stained, fiberglass tub. I tried working with the cats for half a day, but I've never felt really *needed* by a cat, they are far too indifferent for me. I wanted slobbery unconditional love, so I spent the rest of the week down with the dogs. My first job in the morning was to get the dogs out of their cages and into the yard and back into their cages as quickly as possible, so that all of them had a chance to go to the toilet. After that, I spent the rest of the morning rotating the dogs, cleaning out their cages and re-filling their dishes. That was all there was too it. Two hours of hard work in the morning and I spent the rest of the day playing with the dogs in the yard or taking them for walks around Newtown Park. It doesn't seem like much, but it made all the difference in the world to the fourteen dogs who spent twenty-two hours a day locked up in a cage. I loved it. Nothing beats throwing a ball for a dog; it's one of life's simple pleasures. All the animals at the shelter needed was a little bit of human contact. Tiring as it can be, it's a tough place to leave at the end of the day. It's very easy to develop friendships with the dogs, and walking out on fourteen pairs of puppy-dog eyes is rough.

IT APPEARS THAT THE PEOPLE NEW TO THIS COUNTRY ARE DOING A MUCH BETTER JOB OF SUPPORTING THEIR ADOPTED COMMUNITIES THROUGH VOLUNTEERING THAN THE REST OF US AND, I HATE TO SAY, "AS USUAL", WHITE MALES ARE NOT PULLING THEIR WEIGHT.

Most of the volunteers at the SPCA work a half-day shift, either morning or afternoon, but there was one guy there who also stayed on the entire day. We got to talking and it turned he was there to do community service as well. So we sat back, talking about how our lawyers fucked us, and then it occurred to me that we were the only two males on the volunteer roster for that day - there must have been eight or ten females - and it left me wondering if the voluntary workforce as a

whole consisted almost solely of women. Joanne Double, one of the volunteer coordinators at the SPCA, told me, half-jokingly, that this was generally the case, because "women are so much more willing to give up their time. Men might sit there and watch the news, watch movies during the day when they have a day off. Women will come in and go 'how can I help?' I don't know that I would say that women are more compassionate but we are brought up thinking that's the way we are *supposed* to be, to come out and help in voluntary stuff. I don't think women are intrinsically more caring, I think it's just a cultural thing."

Cultural phenomenon aside, when I went back to Volunteer Wellington for my next job I found out that women *are* doing a lot more voluntary work. 67% of the voluntary workforce is made up of women. In addition, 21% of volunteers are new migrants and 31% of all volunteers are Asian. Pakeha New Zealanders and European volunteers make up only 29% and 17%, respectively. It appears that the people new to this country are doing a much better job of supporting their adopted communities through volunteering than the rest of us and, I hate to say "as usual", white males are not pulling their weight. I asked Harper what might account for the large number of new migrants doing voluntary work. She told me "that when people come to a new place they often haven't got a family network at hand. They want to integrate in many different ways with the community, so they discover that, through volunteering, they can make a whole lot of new friends. They get a sense of what the local culture is all about, work-wise and socially as well. All that is going to help with employment possibilities and often they are quite surprised at how much they enjoy it."

Padding my CV hadn't really occurred to me, but if I could do something that would be useful for myself as well as the community, then why not? I took another look through the list of volunteer jobs and came up with Access Radio. Access Radio has been a voluntary organisation since its inception in 1981. It employs no professional broadcasters whatsoever; everything put on the air has been recorded by volunteers. There are over 120 different programs in 30 different languages, including an eclectic mix of English programmes: Musicians, storytellers, current affairs and the Capital Arts show. Kedron Parker, the director of the radio station, gave me an example of how easy it is to come in and get involved in radio.

"The Capital Arts show has been around for awhile but it was essentially reinvented about two or three months ago when we broadened the number of people involved. It's really been a magnet for the community to get involved in radio. People walk in off the streets and within a week or two they are producing some pretty neat stories that go on the air." She handed me the latest copy of Volunteer Wellington's newsletter that had run a story on the station and had one of their volunteers pictured on the back cover. "This is Melissa McDonald who works on the show. I suggested to the group [of loose-knit volunteers that run the show] that they do a piece on how the bypass is affecting our community artists and she took the story. She produced a really great piece and we've submitted it for the 2005 New Zealand Radio Awards - so she went from having zero radio experience a few months ago to having, what I think, is one of the best stories I've heard about the bypass."

Kedron introduced me to Ian, one of the technicians who works for the station and trains volunteers as to how to record programs. I sat down with Ian in one of the sound booths for about an hour while he showed me the ins and outs of the recording process: How to make sure your voice is stable; how to play with the equalizers; the functions of all those gimmicky buttons and slide-dials you see on a soundboard - not a bad way to work off some community service. In less than sixty minutes Ian had me ready to go on the air so I could publicly whinge about that soggy sack of a judge that put me in this spot in the first place - and all from behind the safety of the entire Pacific Ocean. But one of the important responsibilities of a volunteer at Access Radio is recording community advertisements for organisations that wouldn't normally be able to afford airtime. And Ian suggested I practice doing a few of those before I made a programme of my own. It sounded easy at first, but then Ian left me alone in the sound booth and I panicked, forgetting everything I had just learned. It took me a good fifteen minutes to get up the courage to go ask Ian if he wouldn't mind turning on the microphone, as this simple step had passed utterly beyond my powers of recollection.

With that solved I moved on to recording my first ever radio program, a 30-second spot for a children's art exhibition in Island Bay. It took me forty-five minutes. As far as operating the gizmos and switches I was fine, I just couldn't stand the sound of my own voice. It's not too bad when I am listening to a tape-recording of an interview, but in a sound booth armed with speakers designed to amplify every nasally twang that I made, I kept having to do it over and over and until I found one I was happy with. Still, it was a pretty cool thing to have walked into Access Radio at noon an on-air virgin and walked out at 2pm a bone-fide broadcaster, albeit in a minimal sense. I guess it was also a cool thing to have helped out the children's art exhibition, but more importantly, if you're ever listening to 783 AM and you hear an advert for a children's art exhibition in Island Bay, and the guy on the radio sounds a little bit nasally and scared, that's me.

I've since been back about once a week to work on my radio skills and rack up a few more community hours. The thing that was nice about Access and the SPCA was their casual atmosphere. It was easy just to ring up and say "I feel like coming in for a day's or a few hours' work" and get put on the roster. But then something sort of strange started to happen. I started to get some sort of volunteering bug. I still needed to complete the rest of my community service, but I wanted to do something that really helped someone out. So I went back to Volunteer Wellington and tried to find a job that I could look back on and say, "I did that. I gave that guy some hope."

Unfortunately, there wasn't much Harper could do to help me out, because at that time I wasn't ready to make a long-term commitment to an organisation. I had always thought of volunteering as very nonchalant, the kind of thing you do whenever you have a few free hours and there isn't anything on TV. But many of the programmes run by community organisations require weeks or months of training and a commitment from a volunteer of months or even years. One such organisation that was on my list of interesting places was Literacy Aotearoa, an organisation devoted to helping adults learn to read and write. And even though it soon became clear that they were asking for more than I was able to give, I still sat down with their volunteer coordinator to find out what they were all about.

Lyn Clark, like most of the volunteer coordinators I spoke

IT MAKES A LOT MORE SENSE NOW. WHETHER SOMEONE IS WORKING OFF A GUILTY SOCIAL CONSCIENCE, OR REPAYING A DEBT TO SOCIETY, OR WHETHER PURE ALTRUISM ACTUALLY DOES EXIST - WHO GIVES A SHIT?

to, originally started as a volunteer in the programme, but was eventually absorbed by the organisation into a paid role. She tells me, "We are one of the organisations that requires its volunteers to have, well, more than a little bit of training. We provide this training free for volunteers and they have to commit to generally one to two hours a week, plus a Saturday. It's a forty-hour course and we look at the peculiarities of adult learners. They usually want to know everything right away, they can't understand why it is taking them so long to learn and that can often cause a little bit of frustration." I asked Clark if her organisation was looking specifically for volunteers with a background in teaching. "No, they don't have to have a background in teaching, just a willingness to commit. We want ordinary people, because they'll be dealing with ordinary people. It's a partnership, all our tutoring is one-on-one, and you can learn a lot from this person you are helping. We have some tutors who have been here for years and years, I can think of a few who have been tutoring the same student for three years or more. It becomes a friendship, it's part of the rewards of volunteering."

Ah, the rewards of volunteering. Now, this is a little tricky for me, because I've always believed that all human interactions were motivated by greed or an ulterior purpose. Personally, I was trying to get out from under a judicial-sized rock; and I always felt that those who helped the needy were just trying to feel better about themselves, sort of a guilty social conscience. Even the radio station, in a way, could just be a stepping-stone on a career path. I needed to go the bottom, a place where, if altruism truly existed, I could find it.

The Suzanne Albert Compassion Centre - an inner-city kitchen that serves bread and soup in the mornings and a large meal in the evenings to anyone that shows up at the door. Most of the clientele are homeless, or in some state of despair, usually due to alcoholism, drug addiction, mental health problems, long-term unemployment, or just being really down on their luck.

Aside from providing food to the hungry, Sister Margaret Mary listed for me the other things the Compassion Centre provides: "Clothes, we sell clothes for 20c apiece, and we can provide kitchenware for someone who has just gotten a place to stay and doesn't have anything. But more important are the intangibles we provide. Many of our guests are very isolated in the outside world and we provide a place where everyone is accepted, no matter who they are or *how* they are. We also provide a place where people can tell their stories." And how important are volunteers to the Compassion Centre?

"Without volunteers this place wouldn't function for a day. I see the volunteers as absolutely crucial to the centre," she tells me. "Volunteers play a huge part in a practical light. They work in the soup kitchen, distribute the food and pick up the bread. But they also breathe life into the place. Our guests really look forward to seeing their favorite volunteers - the young women in particular are very popular," she laughs. "Volunteers are life-giving, they come bouncing in because they want to be here, there is something about the atmosphere and they help create it... it's basically altruism." So have I found it? There's only one way to find out: Put on an apron and help serve tea.

The Compassion Centre is an eating machine. In hindsight it makes perfect sense, but before working there I guess I had never thought about how hungry people could get. At a quarter to five the Sisters open the door to the dining room and anywhere from fifty to sixty people queue up for dinner, bread, coffee and tea. Forty-five minutes later, most of them are gone. As a rookie I was put on coffee and tea duty, circling the room, re-filling mugs as they emptied and getting extra bread for those who wanted it. While the work at the Compassion Centre is as easy as it comes - serving drinks, putting food on plates and doing the dishes - the Sister wanted to stress the importance of treating the guests with the dignity they deserve. So, feeling a little nervous, I just tried to pretend I was a waiter. "Can I get

you another coffee, sir? More tea, ma-am?" It just came naturally, and it made sense; no matter what problems these people had in the outside world, this was the one place where they could come and be accepted and treated with respect.

It was an easy shift, about an hour and a quarter and I worked there for four days in a row, including a morning. The food was good and I hadn't expected it to be. The people were nice, and I hadn't expected that either. They weren't the group that one would normally think of as Wellington's homeless, they weren't the Glover Park pack, just ordinary people that I passed everyday on Wellington's streets. While some would sit by themselves in the dining room and stare at the wall while they ate, there were a number of loose-knit groups of friends engaged in lively chatter, and there were a few that just wanted to talk to anyone. One evening, just before the kitchen closed up, I took a break and sat down with a Sister at a table where an older man was finishing up his meal. It was obvious he had been coming for a while, and he was cheerfully chatting up the Sister when he said something that broke my heart. All smiles, just regular conversation: "You know Sister, sometimes I wonder what my life would've been like if my wife hadn't died and my children weren't gone. Tell me it's a dream, Sister, tell me I'm asleep and this is all a dream." How are you supposed to respond to a request like that? All the Sister could say was, "It's just a dream."

Softly: "No it's not Sister. It's real, it's all real."

The old man finished his meal, cleared his table and then melted back into whatever unhappy corner of the city he had come from. I see the people from the soup kitchen all the time now when I walk around the city. You'd be surprised at how many among us are in desperate need, you wouldn't know just by looking at them. But I can give them a hot cup of coffee when they come into the soup kitchen. And I can give them that half-nod of acquaintance when I pass them on the footpath. There's a lot dignity in that nod - a basic recognition of someone else's humanity.

It makes a lot more sense now. Whether someone is working off a guilty social conscience, or repaying a debt to society, or whether pure altruism actually does exist - who gives a shit? The voluntary workforce is the glue that keeps the hem of society from fraying even further. Looking after abandoned animals, making a connection through community radio, teaching someone to read, giving a hungry person a bowl of soup - volunteers work the edge of society. There aren't any statistics that measure how many volunteers there are in Wellington - I've looked - much less the contribution they make. Something like that is far too nebulous to ever be empirically measured. But without volunteers doing the work that they do... It doesn't really bear thinking about.

I still work at the soup kitchen, and I come in once a week to Access Radio to do some of their community advertisements, and I'm on the emergency list at the SPCA, just in case they don't have anyone to take care of the dogs on a Tuesday - and I guess, if anybody still cares, I finished my community service.

SOMETHING STRANGE STARTED TO HAPPEN. I STARTED TO GET SOME SORT OF VOLUNTEERING BUG. I STILL NEEDED TO COMPLETE THE REST OF MY COMMUNITY SERVICE, BUT I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING THAT REALLY HELPED SOMEONE OUT. SO I WENT BACK TO VOLUNTEER WELLINGTON AND TRIED TO FIND A JOB THAT I COULD LOOK BACK ON AND SAY, "I DID THAT. I GAVE THAT GUY SOME HOPE."

STATISTICS TAKEN FROM VOLUNTEER WELLINGTON'S 2003/2004 ANNUAL REPORT

Volunteers by Gender:

Male 33%
Female 67%

By Occupation:

Student 25%
Seeking paid work 25%
Retired 3%
Registered with WINZ 11%
Part-time paid employment 8%
Not stated 10%
Full-time paid employment 12%
Unpaid labour force 5%

By Ethnicity:

Not stated 1%
Other 12%
Other asian 8%
South asian 2%
Chinese 17%
Japanese/korean 4%
European 17%
Pakeha/nz 29%
Pacific peoples 4%
Maori 6%