Starting the Year on a Good Note

By: Valeryia Zaitsava
VIP Student Coordinator

Another season of volunteering commenced with the 26th Annual Volunteers In Progress Orientation. The event began with an overview of various areas of the Student Development Centre. Several supervisors were there from areas like: Learning Skills Services and Writing Support Centre to briefly describe some of the services offered by their area.

Julie Burke, the MC of the evening, spoke of the direction of the VIP program this year. She mentioned that new positions had been created allowing even more students to volunteer. She also introduced a new initiative for the program: four smaller teams of VIPs with each team headed by one of the VIP Student Coordinators. Volunteers from each area of SDC are in the following teams: the Red and Green Team share the English Conversation Leaders, the Yellow Team include VIPs in Learning Skills Services, Services for Students with Disabilities, and the Student Development Centre and the White Team includes VIPs in International and Exchange Student Centre and Indigenous Services.

For the reception part of the evening, volunteers were not only treated to some delicious snacks, but also to some great musical entertainment. Katie Bestvater played a few exceptional pieces on the cello and was later joined by Julie on keyboard. The crowd responded warmly to the performance and enjoyed the originality of the pieces. Everyone got to meet some of their fellow volunteers and supervisors and the year began on a good note.
VIP is Growing: New Positions for the Writing Support Centre

The Writing Support Centre (WSC) provides workshops and one-on-one tutoring for undergraduate and graduate students. The WSC has offered a peer tutoring service since its beginning and now wants to expand the program by partnering with the VIP Program. As a Writing Peer Tutor, volunteers will have a chance to shadow and be trained by professional Writing Counsellors. The Writing Peer Tutors will work one-on-one with students from a range of disciplines to help them improve the structure, clarity, argument, impact and flow of their writing. I had a chance to interview WSC Program Coordinator, Paul Schmidt, about these new positions.

Julie: What led to the creation of these new positions?

Paul: In the new Western Student Services building we have a beautiful Writing Centre that has a much greater capacity than the one we had before. Considering the large demand for our services, we have been hoping to expand our service for a while. Now with the new space and our partnering with the VIP Program, we are looking forward to offering more one-on-one tutoring and shorter waiting times for students, especially during the peak times.

Julie: What opportunities do the new VIPs have in this new position?

Paul: This position is a challenging one. VIPs will be working with students from a broad range of disciplines, skill levels and personalities. As a tutor, our goal is to empower the students by equipping them to become better writers. VIPs will be well prepared to step into their role through training sessions and shadowing professional Writing Counsellors. No matter what occupation our volunteers are pursuing, the experience of working in a professional setting and strengthening their interpersonal skills will be a great asset. We have had volunteers apply this experience in careers such as teaching, journalism, and editing, among others.

Julie: How have students responded to this new service?

Paul: Students have enjoyed working together with peers to improve their writing. We try to make sure the Writing Peer Tutors are paired up with students who are at a junior level to them in order to contribute to a smooth teaching environment. Writing Peer Tutors may also have more insights into the challenges facing students today as they are still in the midst of it. It may also appear to be less intimidating to work with peers rather than professional Writing Counsellors. This helps us reach a group of students that may otherwise not have sought out our service.

Julie: How do students get involved?

Paul: We are currently accepting applications. The official kick off for the Writing Peer Tutor program will begin during the second semester. All interested applicants who have demonstrated a strong writing ability, dedication, professionalism and interpersonal skills should apply online at www.sdc.uwo.ca/vip
I long to know people, not just study them.
I long to love people, not try to change them.

I want to look into the eyes of my own reflection and see the one person I can change.

For there is no truth that hits as hard as a truth lived,
Nor belief as convicting as one witnessed.

And though my heart will one day fail,
I know my spirit will prevail.
For I have touched the heart of someone, somewhere.
VIPs go the the Grand

VIP Orientation

Dessert Night at Demetre's
VIP: Elizabeth Vang

English Conversation Leader

With so many opportunities to become involved in the community at Western, the challenge becomes in trying to figure out what you would like to become involved in. Rather than simply getting involved, for the last two years Elizabeth has been an English Conversation Leader facilitating groups of international students to become more fluent in conversational English. I had a chance to catch up with Elizabeth before she started a new journey. Here’s what she had to say about her experience as a VIP, as well as advice she has for new VIPs.

Julie: What motivated you to volunteer with the VIP program as opposed to another volunteer opportunity?
Elizabeth: VIP’s English Conversation Program offers all of that and it’s something I love doing on the side, whether it’s volunteer or paid work. Even when I graduated and moved away from London I continued to work and volunteer in a similar program (English Conversation Program). Either way, I know that I’ll continue to be apart of a similar program.

Julie: What was your most memorable experience with VIP?
Elizabeth: My most memorable experience would have to be my first circle I ever had. It was my first summer living in London. I had 4 participants: 3 from China and 1 from South Korea; 2 male and 2 female. They were all much older than me and were great to teach and work with. There was one participant who was a visiting scholar and couldn’t say my name properly. His heavy accent hindered his pronunciation and he would always try to pronounce my name properly every session. There was a ‘Chinese way’ of saying my name ‘Elizabeth’, but he still refused to say it that way. He wanted to say it the correct way and would always try each session. There was a lot of laughter out of this from the rest of the group and myself, including him. I told him it was my goal to help him pronounce my name properly by the end of the summer and he did! It was a great feeling to be able to help someone with their language skills. I learned a lot about developing language skills and a lot about the English language. It was a great summer volunteering!

Julie: What lessons will you take with you both professionally and personally?
Elizabeth: Without my experience with VIP I wouldn’t be who I am today. Before working with international students/newcomers to Canada, I wasn’t very appreciative and aware of the programs and services for them. But after my first summer volunteering, it opened my eyes more and it made me want to help. Something that started as a hobby became one of my passions in life. Through my experiences, I have learned to be more patient and to listen attentively to others. I am thankful for what I have learned from the ECP, from my supervisor Rachel, and from the students I have taught. I am a student learning and working to become a public service worker. In order for me to do the best job that I can do, I must be able to speak and work cooperatively with individuals from different backgrounds. I will never take the experiences I had with the ECP for granted. It is the most exhilarating experience one could ever have, if one is to make the most of it. And I did. I didn’t volunteer to make my resume look good. I did it because I wanted to. I’ve been volunteering since I was 12 and I will continue to volunteer until I’m old and grey.

Julie: Do you have any advice for incoming VIPs?
Elizabeth: Have an open mind. Be patient. Don’t give up. Try your best. Make mistakes. Don’t be a know-it-all because you’re not perfect in English. I wasn’t and am still not. I’m always learning and you’ll learn soon enough that you’re going to have homework to do if you want to help someone improve their English skills. It doesn’t happen overnight, but when it does you’ll feel great for helping someone improve their English.
A Word from VIP Alumni

Julie Burke
VIP Program Assistant

One of the common phrases you hear when discussing the VIP Program is gaining ‘career-related experience.’ I found this intriguing and here is what some of our VIP alumni have to say about how their experience with VIP has had an impact on their careers. Here’s some of their stories. And who knows, maybe one day you’ll have a similar story to share.

Amy Sohn
Previously an English Conversation Leader, now an ESL Teacher in Korea

“During the summer after my third year at Western, I was an English Conversation Group Leader. I enjoyed my experience a lot as I met great volunteers and the people in my group were awesome. Even better, is that I saw firsthand how the VIP Program is truly beneficial to everybody who participates in it. This year I’m continuing along the same line of work as an ESL teacher for middle school kids in Suwon city, South Korea. I’m having a great time meeting new people, travelling through Asia and interacting with the kids. I appreciate my time with the VIP Program since it gave me a little taste of what it is like to be an ESL teacher. Thanks!”

Jennifer Schwass
Previously an English Conversation Leader, and Information Assistant; now a Law Student

“While I was a VIP, I worked for one year as an Information Assistant for the Student Development Centre, then for another year as an English Conversation Circle Leader for international students. It was an amazing experience and I still talk to some of my conversation circle friends. In fact, we had a “show and tell” with objects from our home countries in the English Conversation Circle and one of my “students” brought in a picture of a panda from China as a gift for me, and it’s currently hanging on the wall in my apartment as I write this. It was one of the most memorable experiences I had at Western.

When I graduated from Western in 2006, I moved to Toronto to attend Osgoode Hall Law School. While at law school, I’ve worked in a student-run legal aid clinic providing free legal representation to low-income individuals in Toronto. This is my final year of law school, and then I’ll be moving to Orangeville to article with an internationally-recognized law firm that specializes in charities and not-for-profit law. The firm is very committed to community work and pro bono legal representation (in Canada and internationally), so I hope to continue my love of volunteerism that I learned from being a VIP.

I’d love to thank all the VIP directors, organizers, and volunteers for their dedication and commitment to the VIP Program at Western. My undergrad wouldn’t have been the same without it!”

Payam Ashoori
Previously an English Conversation Leader and Learning Skills Assistant, now a Queen’s Medical Student

“During my time with VIP, I was honoured to have the positions of English Conversation Leader and Learning Skills Assistant. These experiences were among some of the best I’ve had at Western, offering excellent opportunities to reach out and help others while working alongside wonderful people.”

For more from Alumni visit our website at www.sdc.uwo.ca/vip and click on ‘Oh the Places You will Go’

Helping Hands Fall 2009