

Attracting and Motivating Volunteers

“Doors Open Winnipeg” has had two successful runs, giving locals and visitors a chance to see inside some of the unique buildings in the city. One of the stops in the annual event is the Vaughan Street Jail, an historic building built in 1881. Like most of the other venues open during the two-day event, the Vaughan Street Jail tours rely on volunteers.

Kristen Verin-Treusch, owner of Muddy Waters Tours and President of the Friends of Vaughan Street Jail, has two years experience now in attracting and using volunteers for the tours.

“In the first year, we found volunteers from the general public through the “Doors Open” broader volunteer base,” Verin-Treusch says. “For the second year, we decided to recruit and pick our own volunteers.”

Having had the benefit of the first Doors Open Winnipeg event, Verin-Treusch and her group were able to identify the kinds of volunteer help they would need and the numbers. Through their own organization and with friends and family, there were about 25 potential volunteers in the second year.

Attracting the volunteers for this event proved not too difficult, in part because of the inherent interest the members of the Friends already had in the building. Volunteers became even more interested as they realised how they would spend their shifts.

“Partly because the building is in disrepair so we couldn’t access all of it, we decided to make the jail tours as entertaining as possible,” Verin-Treusch says. “Volunteers were dressed in period costumes and took on the characters of people who would have been in the jail many years ago.”

When visitors arrived, they saw the jail as if they were new inmates, being taken around by the costumed volunteers who had memorized relevant lines to relate the tales of the jail.

“There was a risk of volunteer burnout because we had long shifts,” Verin-Treusch admits. “The jail also is dusty and has no heat except in the basement where volunteers in constable uniforms became very hot, especially with large groups of visitors coming through.”

Despite the potential downsides, the volunteers were motivated and excited by the way they were presenting the jail to the public. It was fun and interesting for them as well as for the public. The more enthusiastic the volunteers, the more successful they were in generating interest among the public about the building.

Motivating the volunteers went beyond the fun of the event itself. Food and beverages were available for all the volunteers and each volunteer received a pass to Verin-Treusch’s Murder, Mystery & Mayhem tour in the summer. “

Many of the volunteers had so much fun that they want to come back. In fact,” Verin-Treusch says, “we already have 100% of them signed up again.”