

Body and soul

Exercise is good for you – and so is volunteering. **Caroline Roberts** meets three women who combine both, doubling the benefits and making the world a better place

LOCAL HEROES

1 When Sharon Prince sets off for a run, it's with an added sense of purpose. Each week she meets a group of fellow volunteers with the charity GoodGym at east London's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. They run an average of two miles to a location, complete a task for the local community, and then run home again. 'We do a lot of work at a disused dockyard that's being redeveloped into a community space, as well as at a school and a playground,' says Sharon. 'It involves plenty of scrubbing, sanding, painting and digging, so that helps you get fit too. We're usually at the task for around half an hour – it's amazing what 20 people can get done in that time.'

Paul Jackson, head teacher at Manorfield Primary School, has certainly been impressed. 'Over the past three years we've been transforming the school facilities and what we've achieved so far wouldn't have been possible without the ever-enthusiastic band of GoodGymers,' he says.



Sharon and the other GoodGymers have helped with clearing rivers and gardening (right)



'They emerge from the canal path, work their socks off, then disappear into the distance. Children and staff arriving at school the following day are amazed at the improvements that have magically taken place overnight.'

Tasks can be requested by local services, community groups and other charities, and GoodGym has recently started sending runners to Newham General Hospital to take drinks and papers to people waiting for appointments. 'We're also sometimes dispatched to patients' homes to move furniture around so that a hospital bed can be installed and they can be discharged,' says Sharon. 'That means a badly needed bed on a ward can be freed up for another patient.'

Volunteers can also work individually on 'Mission runs' where they visit an elderly or disabled person in their home to do a specific task, such as

gardening or putting up a curtain rail. They can also be paired with an isolated older person for 'Coach runs', which involve visiting once a week for a chat and a cup of tea. 'We call them coach runs because, just like a coach, that person gives you the motivation to get out there and run because they're expecting you,' Sharon explains.

It all provides a better workout than the average gym membership, she adds. 'I used to be completely inactive. The most I did was walk to the station, but now I've just signed up for my sixth half-marathon!'

To find a GoodGym group near you, see www.goodgym.org

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Sharon taking part in the RunThrough 10k in Victoria Park

ON THE RUN

2 For Jo Moseley, exercise and improving the environment go hand in hand – she is one of a growing band of 'ploggers' who combine litter-picking with jogging. 'I've always picked up litter when out walking, so when I started running, it just seemed natural to carry on doing it,' says Jo, who lives near Skipton on the edge of the Yorkshire Dales. 'I'm very lucky to live in a beautiful place so I take pride in helping to look after it.'

There's recently been a huge change in attitudes to littering, and particularly plastic pollution, she says, especially since Sir David Attenborough's *Blue Planet II* documentary. 'Prior to that, when people saw you picking up litter, they'd think you were a bit crazy. There's much more awareness and appreciation now. Although sometimes people assume I'm doing community service and say "Here you go, love" as they hand me their cigarette end!' she laughs.

'I just stuff the litter in my pockets, or if I find a plastic bag or bottle, I'll

fill it. Bags of dog poo need to be carried at arm's length though – it certainly makes you speed up! The bending, squatting and stretching is really good, and looking out for litter makes me more aware of my surroundings. I find I'm noticing the flowers and birds much more.'

'When I get home, I feel I've achieved something. The world is such a crazy place at the moment, and anything we can do to make it a little bit better feels like a win.'



Jo picks up litter during her jogs

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WAREHOUSE WORKOUT

3 Marie Belsey keeps fit by volunteering at a warehouse run by the charity FareShare, which collects food industry surplus and redistributes it to local charities and community groups, from homeless hostels to breakfast clubs.

'The warehouse is huge so there's a lot of walking around, collecting different items,' says Marie, who lives in Deptford, south-east London. 'You're picking up and carrying trays weighing up to 10 kilos, and loading and unloading the vans. If you're doing that, you don't need to

go to the gym and lift weights,' she says. 'When I first started going, I'd be absolutely exhausted after a five-hour shift.'

The work is varied and there are roles to suit all physical capabilities, she adds. 'Sometimes you go out on deliveries, and I've got my forklift certificate too. I really enjoy the teamwork, and it's very satisfying to know that all that food isn't going to waste.'

Marie also gets to see some of the benefits, as she runs a local residents' association cookery club that receives a delivery from FareShare. 'It's attended by people of different cultural heritages so we learn from each other as we cook and eat together. It's great to enjoy the fruits of your labour too.'

To find out more about FareShare and its 21 distribution centres around the UK, visit www.fareshare.org.uk



THE BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

You don't always have to work up a sweat to enjoy a health and wellbeing boost from volunteering. Research shows that many types of volunteering bring benefits.

- Helping and cooperating with others stimulates the release of the feel-good brain chemical dopamine. In one study, over 90% of volunteers said it lifted their mood and gave them a sense of purpose.
- Research by Citizens Advice revealed that three-quarters of people with mental health problems found that volunteering helped them manage their condition.
- Around a quarter of volunteers say it helps them cope with a chronic illness.