

Gwent volunteer puts life back on track thanks to HLF

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Dave, one of five people sharing their story in a new magazine, Heritage Matters, published by HLF Wales, is encouraging others to put their time to good use by developing new skills.

42 year-old, Dave, from Cwmbran wanted to do some hands-on archaeology as part of the Ancient Cwmbran project, but he also found that his professional skills came in useful, when he designed publications and a website for the project, helping to spread the word and attract more volunteers.

Torfaen County Borough Council received £48,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the project, which aims to research the old pilgrimage routes and to carry out archaeological digs at key sites in Cwmbran, which stands on an ancient pilgrims' trail that once linked medieval monasteries across Wales.

Dave explains how his decision to volunteer has turned his life around: "Since August 2009, I've been volunteering at least 16 hours a week, producing everything from flyers to information packs and creating and updating the website. Being unemployed can really affect your confidence and self-esteem, volunteering is an ideal way to keep your mind stimulated while gaining or developing skills.

"We found a fragment of a Roman roof tile and a 14,000-year-old stone arrowhead, which is not bad for the site of a 'new town!' And, suddenly you're holding in your hand a tiny piece of the lives of people who lived here centuries ago. It gives you a real sense of connection – there's nothing quite like it.

"At the same time I've had the chance to start again. The skills that I developed have helped me to get a new job at the Regeneration Department in Torfaen, which I start in November – a direct result of volunteering on the project. It will be great to put my skills to good use for the rest of the area.

"Before I was involved in the project, I hated public speaking and I was always the one stood in the corner at a party! But now I give regular presentations to other volunteers and have gained a lot more confidence as a result.

"Anybody who's unemployed and wanting to get back into work should definitely find out about heritage projects in their area and use their free time wisely, after all, there's only so much daytime TV you can watch and crosswords to complete!"

Jennifer Stewart, Head of HLF in Wales, said: "Projects like these give local people the opportunity to develop new skills while exploring the rich history their towns have to share. Whether it's a young person gaining the confidence to take the first step on the jobs ladder or an adult gaining new skills to get back into work, volunteering is invaluable experience and can be lots of fun.

"People are at the heart of HLF projects, which is why we've produced the Heritage Matters magazine, to give the people behind the projects a voice to share their stories and encourage others to get involved in local projects."