Narrator: In honor of National Volunteer Week, the free Bridges Helpdesk for blind low vision youth, in collaboration with Sky's the Limit Communications, bring to you this five-part series on the benefits of volunteering. The Bridges Helpdesk for blind low vision youth logo shows horizontal view of a suspension bridge erected over a body of water. The word “Helpdesk” appears centered below the base of the bridge and above the water. Welcome to Part 5.

David DeNotaris: Today we're here with Mike Bullis, director of The IMAGE Center, independent living center, Baltimore, Maryland area. Has been helping people with disabilities for years achieve independence in all areas of their life. Mike, can you please share with us? What does volunteering, what does that mean to you?

Michael Bullis: I started out most of the careers I've been in by volunteering first , because it really helped me have an opportunity to understand the organization and to get involved with it without any pressure because they're not paying me, and I'm doing them a quote unquote favor. So it's an opportunity for me to learn what's going on. Early on in my career, I volunteered with the NFB significantly. I also volunteered at the Oregon Commission for the blind to run a group for them that nobody wanted to run because it had to do with employment. And they knew none of these blind people could really get jobs. And I said, “Well, I'm fine. I'll just run a group for you. And we'll see what happens” and ended up getting a lot of people jobs. And then I said, “Now you're going to pay me” because, you know, once I had demonstrated the value, so I think it's, it's incredibly valuable. But, a cautionary note to everyone, going to most organizations anymore and saying, “I really want to volunteer, so how about, how about I help you do folding and mailings?” And the answer is going to be “we email virtually everything and we don't Fold paper anymore.” So you have to really think, again, a tour sometimes of an office is really helpful, because you'll get a feel for where could a volunteer fit in here and do well? And how, you know, “how could I be of value here?” If you can do it that way, that's perfect. If not, then you know, obviously take things as they come.

David DeNotaris: Oh, Mike, it's such a privilege to be with you today. And we're grateful for your time.

Michael Bullis: Thank you very much.

Eileen Rivera Ley: Does anyone else have any advice for our potential volunteers?

David DeNotaris: Miss Carlton, would you like to share?

Carlton Anne Cook Walker: We have heard so much great advice here, whether you go into it with an altruistic purpose that “I want to help others, I'm tired of people helping me all the time. And I want to give back, I want them to know that I can give back.” Whether it just kind of comes upon you, that it just falls into your lap because “this is what I love doing. So I'm going to do it. And hey, there's an opportunity to do it to help others.” Or even if it's kind of a pecuniary motive. “I need the job, I want to get paid for this. Maybe if I show them how well I can do then I will get paid for this or another job.” It doesn't matter. Because the intent is not as important as what you are doing for others and what you're getting back. And you're going to get back good things, I think from what we've heard today. A constant thread that I'm seeing, though, is that your heart's in it, you're interested in it to begin with. If it's something that doesn't interest you at all, I mean, like not at all, it might be better to look for a different opportunity, because it should be fun. It should be enjoyable, it shouldn't be arduous.

David DeNotaris: How has volunteering helped you? You're, you know, you're a mom, you're a national president of an organization. How has volunteering changed your life?

Carlton Anne Cook Walker: Oh, it's changed my life in so many ways. I think my first volunteer experience I can remember was in second grade. And that was set outside the room with a young man who had moved from Brazil. He spoke Portuguese, and I for some reason was assigned to teach him and I had no idea what I was doing. But it brought out in me that love of teaching, and we learned together and I learned working with other people is enjoyable. And then through my life soup kitchens, blood drives. Oh, one time in law school, we took little bears, stuffed them for police officers to have in their trunks when they had to go to a scene that was really not fun for a child. Just knowing that what you're doing is helping others and is making other people happy is so impactful. And now with the advocacy I'm doing for blindness and for individuals with and without disabilities, I truly believe that A rising tide lifts all boats. This is not a piece of pizza that, if you get a slice and I lose a slice. We are making tons of pizzas. And that pizza oven is going nonstop. And the more we give, the more ingredients we have, and we're all going to have so much extra, we have to get more people involved and give it to them. That's how I view volunteering. And if you get your bills paid later on, that's awesome, too.

David DeNotaris: I love it.

Eileen Rivera Ley: That's how it works. Right?

David DeNotaris: Eileen, I think we've got a lot of great content here. What do you think? Do you have any advice for high school students who are maybe considering volunteering, a little nervous about it? What advice would you give them?

Eileen Rivera Ley: Well, I would give some advice to start doing some networking, and try to meet other people who have volunteered in different places. Because if they had a positive experience volunteering in that place, then you could, you know, piggyback off of their positive experience. So, just like when you're looking for a job, you want to network and talk to people who may be working in that field or those organizations. Same thing for volunteering, you are going to share your time, so you want to be careful and look for something that's going to be a good fit. So even network with your friends and family and relatives and find out who's been volunteering where, who had a good experience, or who has some advice to offer because, you know, we old people, we love to give advice.

David DeNotaris: Absolutely. Eileen, have you found that volunteering has helped you in your career?

Eileen Rivera Ley: Volunteering has really transformed my career and shaped my career from the very beginning. When I think about my volunteer experiences in college, I volunteered in Boston for a group called The Key Latchkey kids. And what we did as college students is we would create these after school activities for kids whose parents weren't home when they came home from school. So with that said, I was in college, I was studying economics, I was learning about the world from the book side. But then I was learning about the real world by interacting with these students who were having a lot of trouble getting their homework done, because they were alone at home so much. We were creating a safe space. So I learned a lot more realistic stuff. I learned how the world really is outside of the books by volunteering. So that was a very special and cherished volunteer opportunity that I had.

David DeNotaris: Eileen, I know volunteering has, I liked the word that you use, transformed your life as it has mine also. And you know, you can't spell volunteer without you in it. And I I know that I was asked in 1993 or 1994 by my friend Joe Ruffalo to serve as the coordinator of a program JOB -- Job Opportunities for the Blind. And, you know, he's, you know, Joe said, “Oh, Dave, you know, can you, can you maybe help?” I said “what do you do, joe?” “Well, you set up different trainings and events and,

and you know, people have questions." And Eileen, 30 years later, or pretty close to it, I use those same skills as I learned then. How to organize trainings, how to organize an agenda, how to write a press release, how to get people involved, how to engage your audience, how to get people excited about an event. I use all of those skills that I learned volunteering, to help me in running our company today. So like you, volunteering has transformed my life as well.

Eileen Rivera Ley: Shall I tell my final story about how volunteering transformed my life?

David DeNotaris: I wish you would.

Eileen Rivera Ley: Okay. Back in the day, I used to be president of the NFB of Baltimore City, and we received a grant to produce a video about the kinds of jobs blind people can do. Well, I had a list of 30 people to interview, and one of these individuals was a totally blind math teacher from Louisiana. So we're there at this conference in Dallas, and we're recording, and the crew runs out of film. And so the crew You know, this is an old story, right, the crew goes back to their trucks to get more film for their cameras. And during that time, this young teacher, who claimed to be independently wealthy, invited me to dinner and insisted on taking me to dinner. So we had a networking dinner, but one thing led to another and he became my husband. So that's how I met my husband, Tom Ley. So you never know what's going to happen when you volunteer.

David DeNotaris: Absolutely. I love it. So it may help you build your resume. It might help you build your network, and it might help you build your family.

Narrator: This unique project is being coordinated through the IMAGE Center of Maryland, a Center for Independent Living in Towson, and it is funded by a grant from the Maryland Department of Education division of special education, early intervention services.