What a Day with a Park Volunteer Can Do

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The Wonder of It All
100 Stories from the National Park Service
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Yosemite Conservancy
Yosemite National Park
Five years ago was one of the most memorable periods in my life, and the National Park Service played an important part in that experience. It was in July of that year that I took the woman soon to become my wife for a picnic at Governors Island National Monument in New York Harbor. It was a beautiful summer morning. It was also a weekday—quieter than a busy Saturday or Sunday.

Because my fiancée had never visited this national monument before, we decided to begin—and work up our appetite—by taking a guided tour. And that is where we met a man who continues to play a large role in our lives. He was a National Park Service volunteer and had been giving tours of the island's historic district for several years. There were four visitors taking his tour that day—the two of us and another couple. For the next sixty minutes, our guide told us the story of the island's long and rich history. He took us inside Fort Jay, the star-shaped structure originally built in the late 1700s when it looked like the young United States might again go to war with some European power. He showed us the island's beautiful grounds and explained how what we were seeing tied in to the history of the city and the country. We ended at Castle Williams, yet another fortification on the island. This one was round and had been designed by an army engineer named Jonathan Williams. President Thomas Jefferson had appointed Colonel Williams as the first leader of the United States Military Academy at West Point.

The castle was indeed beautiful, but at this time, we could not enter. He explained that the National Park Service was restoring the old fort.

We had learned so much in that hour and were now ready for lunch. There were many picnic tables nearby, all with beautiful views of the New York City skyline. The other couple had left, and we asked our new friend...
if he would like to join us. Thankfully, he said yes. And so the three of us spent the summer afternoon eating, chatting, and enjoying the surrounding scenery. We agreed to keep in touch.

Summer turned into fall, and my fiancée and I married that October. It was a heady and hectic time in our lives. My new wife had recently gone back to college; work was busy. Then there was the stress and exhilaration of setting up house. Around this time, I also began to speak about volunteering myself. With this in mind, I reached out to friends in the National Park Service for advice—including our friend the volunteer from Governors Island.

While all of these things were happening, there were sadder events taking place as well. My mother was suffering from cancer and undergoing treatment. That November, just three weeks after I married, my father passed away. As one might imagine, these events led me to reassess what is important in my life. It also seemed that if I wanted to contribute in some way, now was the time to do it. So, I made that phone call—I had decided to volunteer at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, part of another national monument located in New York Harbor. I began in February.

I jumped in headfirst and knew right away that I had made a good decision. Eventually, I was giving tours, manning the information desk with the rangers, and making myself helpful to the boatloads of visitors who arrived hourly. One of the wonderful things about the Ellis Island museum is that the entire world comes to you. I met people from around the country and around the world. It was exhilarating.

Keith J. Muchowski on Governors Island.
Then began my next chapter with the National Park Service. And fittingly, it involved our friend the volunteer from Governors Island.

One late winter’s day, a year after I began volunteering, our friend accompanied my wife and me to Fort Wadsworth, part of the Gateway National Recreation Area on Staten Island. We met at an old-style coffee shop in Brooklyn, chatted a bit to catch up, and then took the bus across the Verrazano Bridge. We had a wonderful tour with a ranger who really knew his stuff. It was fascinating to learn more about how the many fortifications in New York Harbor had once worked together to keep the city safe. That evening over dinner, our friend recommended that perhaps I might enjoy volunteering at Governors Island. I was hesitant at first but then realized that a change might allow me to reach more of the public. With some regret, I decided to move across the harbor.

So that Memorial Day weekend, there I was in my volunteer uniform at Governors Island National Monument. I sat in on ranger tours and soaked up all I could. As the weeks went by, I learned more and more. Soon, I was given more responsibility to work with the visitors; and by summer’s end,
I was giving my own tours of the historic district. That was four years ago, and I have been there ever since.

Many exciting things have happened in the meantime. My mother’s cancer went into remission and she is doing better; my wife graduated from college; we are settled in to our home. The work continues at Governors Island. A few summers ago, the National Park Service completed its renovation of Castle Williams, and the old fort is now open to the public—it is one of the most visited spots at the national monument. My friend is still there too. Every time I see him, I can’t help but think of everything that has happened since we first met. It gives me a warm feeling when I see him leading a group around the historic district, just as he had done for us all those years ago.