

Feature: Passing torch, passing volunteerism

www.chinaview.cn 2008-07-31 16:15:39

Special report: 2008 Olympic Games

BEIJING, July 31 (Xinhua)-- David Brettel, director of the volunteer program of the Sydney Organizing Committee for Olympic Games (SOCOG), is surprised to find that the seminal program in Sydney has grown into a thriving tree in Beijing.

The Australian, who is an Olympic consultant, developed and implemented staffing policies, procedures and workforce conditions from 1996 to 2000. He has been invited by the Beijing Organizing Committee for Olympic Games (BOCOG) to advise on volunteers.

Being a lover of tennis and cricket, Brettell decided to contribute to the Olympics after he went to see the Munich Olympics in 1972. To date, he has been to the Olympics in nine cities. "The Olympics have long been a passion of mine," he says.

The chance came in 1996. "SOCOG wanted to find somebody independent to carry out the volunteer program," says Brettell. It was a great challenge for him, a marketing specialist with an insurance company.

The program under his directorship turned out to be a success. More than 62,000 volunteers across the country participated. Half were aged over 45, the oldest being 82 and the youngest 16.

He is proud of its record for retaining volunteers. "About 5 percent of our volunteers were lost, compared to a much higher record of 20 percent at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics," he says.

The success lies in good recruitment, training, management and motivation. "You have to match the right skills to the right people, and vice versa."

Antonio Samaranch, then-president of the International Olympics Committee, said at the closing ceremony of Sydney Olympics that the volunteers were "the most wonderful and dedicated games volunteers ever".

Eight years later, Brettel finds the volunteer program in Beijing has made a great leap forward. "The BOCOG has done a lot of thinking, organization and training. "

The recruitment work started in August 2006, and more than 1.1 million people applied, out of which 10 percent were selected. The number of applicants is ten times larger than that of Sydney. A major feature of Beijing Olympics is that university students are being fully tapped.

All the volunteers have received systematic training, including general, professional and venue training, says Liu Jian, director of volunteer program under BOCOG. Some 33,000

volunteers participated in the Good Luck Beijing test matches as part of the preparation. Foreign experts on volunteering work are also invited to give technical guidance, such as Brettell.

"In my opinion, the volunteer program of Beijing Olympic Games will be a new benchmark, as Beijing has designed a much better plan than any other city, especially the massive city volunteer program. Beijing is unique. If successful, the volunteer program in the future will change."

What Brettell has in mind is the long-standing effect of volunteerism. Since the Sydney Olympics, the number of volunteers in Australia has grown by 25 percent to 4 million. People have come to realize the importance of volunteering, for which the Games can take credit, he says.

"The success of the Olympics will be very strongly influenced by the involvement of the communities in which they are held. The best way for that involvement to manifest itself is through volunteering," he says.

Similarly, the university volunteers at Beijing Olympics will keep up the spirit of volunteerism and make a long-term work in the future, he says.

Sustainability is a priority in the post-Olympic blueprint. Under a three-year project initiated by BOGOC, Beijing will continue the implementation of many small community volunteer programs. "Beijing is deliberately planning a legacy," Brettell says.

Liu Hui, an officer of UN Volunteers (UNV), says the UNV will help establish an online platform linking those who need volunteer services and those who can provide it during and after the Games. "The mechanism is important to guarantee the continuity. "

A total of 74,615 volunteers will provide services at Games venues, the Olympic Village and media centers. Another 1 million "social volunteers" have been helping to keep traffic flowing and maintain social order in the communities and townships of Beijing.

More than 400,000 city volunteers have been working at 550 street stalls around Beijing since July, providing information, emergency aid and translation for people from around the world.

Brettell hopes the Beijing Olympic Games will be "super-successful". "The motto 'One world, one dream' is fantastic. It refers to the world community as one. It is a dream and ambition to be fulfilled. It will also set a model for the future. "