London, UK

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;372:n606

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n606>

Published: 15 March 2021

Why I . . . am a Brownie leader

Royal Navy emergency medicine trainee Laura Cottey talks to **Marika Davies** about being a Brownie leader with the charity Girlguiding

Marika Davies

“After a long day at work I know I’m going to have a great evening and I’m going to come away smiling from having been with the girls,” Laura Cottey says.

She joined the Brownies aged seven and has been active in the world of guiding ever since. “I remember the amazing times and experiences I had and that’s what makes me want to give back to the organisation,” Cottey says. “I know my guiding experiences have hugely impacted my life and contributed to my achievements, so I really want girls and young women to have the same opportunities.”

The highlight of being a Brownie leader for Cottey is the weekly meeting with the 7-10 year olds in her unit. “Being with the girls is fantastic,” she says. “During intense work rotations I love the fact that I can go and spend time with them, it’s a great way to decompress.”

Her favourite activities involve being outdoors and teaching the Brownies skills such as campfire building. “A lot of the fun of it is playing games with them and singing and toasting marshmallows over campfires, all of those things you wouldn’t usually spend your evening doing,” she says.

But there is also an emphasis on empowering the girls and helping them to develop and learn new skills. “A big part of our organisation is that we want to empower girls and young women to achieve their potential and develop confidence, particularly with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics subjects,” says Cottey.

She finds it hugely rewarding to see the positive change in the girls during their time with Girlguiding and says it is important for them to see different female role models. “I hope that seeing me as a doctor in the Royal Navy will show them that all career options are open to them, whatever they want to do,” she says.

Cottey has been involved in a number of different Brownie and Guide units as a Girlguiding leader and says it fits well around being a junior doctor, despite the challenges of moving frequently and working shifts.

“Whenever I’ve moved, I’ve been able to make friends and feel part of a community quite quickly,” she says. “I can’t be there every week, but all the units I’ve been involved in have been really supportive of my shift pattern and when I can come.”

While she often uses her medical training to teach her Brownies first aid skills, volunteering has also been an opportunity for Cottey’s own personal development. “The skills I’ve learnt through guiding have been really useful,” she says.

“The ability to look after a group of girls and the things that come with that—the risk assessments, programme planning, and organisation—are completely different skills that really contribute to my working life.”

The covid-19 pandemic has limited what the Brownies can do, but Cottey is positive about running virtual meetings and remote activities. “We’ve hopefully maintained some continuity for them in terms of fun and opportunities during a really challenging time,” she says.

“The joy of virtual guiding is that I can do it at home from my sofa and still get to interact with the girls. I love spending an hour with them online having a really good giggle, just listening to what they say and their take on the world.”

Why volunteer with Girlguiding?

- It’s the perfect hobby for frequent location moves—you can always find a local unit who will appreciate your time
- Inspire the next generation of girls and young women to achieve their potential
- Share your skills and make a difference
- Get connected with your local community and make new friends