

THE NEED FOR HUMAN CONNECTION: AN INTERVIEW WITH THE ACQUAINT TEAM

INTERVIEWED BY GABRIEL ERTSGAARD

Acquaint is a nonprofit organization that provides volunteers with a safe, private way to share cultures and perspectives with people around the globe while simultaneously offering elective communication training that volunteers can use to amplify their impact. CEO Katherine Mahon, CTO Alex Szebenyi, and Cultural Exchange Assistant Yehuda Silverman discuss Acquaint's history and mission below. Those interested in volunteering with Acquaint can find out more at acquaint.org/opportunities.

GE: Could you tell me about the history and mission of Acquaint?

KM: Our mission is to create this platform where anyone can develop collaborative skills and intercultural understanding. We envision a world where our differences no longer hinder our ability to collaborate. Right now we have about 750 volunteers from

over 90 countries that are connecting for one-on-one conversations. The goal is to share culture and perspectives and really learn from each other. We really believe in the ripple effects of interactions like that.

Acquaint in its current form has only been around since 2021. Prior to that, I had founded another nonprofit called HomeAgain VR focused on bringing immersive technology into assisted living communities. When the pandemic hit, we shifted to building what later evolved into the Acquaint platform. Initially it was designed to connect volunteers to assisted living residents to help overcome the effects of isolation. We found, though, that it lacked solidarity. It really felt like one group offering human connection to another, so it was inherently unequal. For this reason, it was much easier to recruit volunteers than assisted living residents.

I'm not sure who thought of it, but one of us said, "Hey, what if we start recruiting people from around the world." With all of the prejudice, conflict, and division, effortful human connection is very needed. We'd been restricting it to this very specific group of people for a very specific reason, but the need is enormous. But we couldn't differentiate anymore. There could be no volunteer role and participant role. Everybody had to be equal. We decided that everybody on the Acquaint platform was going to be a volunteer.

In November of 2021, we posted a volunteer job posting on Facebook, and we targeted it to several English-speaking countries. Almost overnight, we started getting dozens of applicants from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Belize, and Trinidad and Tobago. Ever since then, we've been working to build our capabilities and bring more volunteers onboard.

GE: Could you tell me about your individual backgrounds and what led you to the work you're doing now?

KM: My background is in visual arts. Before I went into nonprofit work, I created 3-D animations and renderings for architecture and products. I worked at Amazon for about a year, and VR was actually part of the work I was doing. I went from there to founding HomeAgain.

YS: I joined Acquaint in early 2023. I saw a posting for a position of cultural exchange assistant. The wording just really resonated with me. In my earlier years, I was a Microsoft Xbox ambassador, so I was online with Microsoft creating inclusive spaces. We connected with people all over the world. I still have friends that I met through that experience over 18 years ago. I saw back then that the internet, the online world, has the potential to create peace. More recently, I have a PhD in Conflict Analysis and Resolution, with a specialization in International Peace. So those two elements of my background have really come together in my work with Acquaint.

AS: I'm the CTO and co-founder of Acquaint. I'm a software developer by trade, now. I originally wanted to go into neuroscience, and I worked in a lab that studied the sense of smell. But I didn't feel like I was making the impact I wanted. Although we sort of fell into doing this, I don't know how I could do anything else. The things I've learned from people around the world have made me look at life a lot differently.

GE: How does the Acquaint platform work, exactly? Do you use chat forums, or video conferencing, or something else?

KM: It's an audio connection, and it all takes place on our website: Acquaint.org. So you don't see each, but you hear each other.

Volunteers sign up on our website and go through a series of trainings. We emphasize things like active listening, intercultural communication, and tolerance. We have a mentoring program where experienced volunteers mentor and help welcome new volunteers. The way the pairings happen is that the volunteers go and set their availability for a given week. There's a calendar on the website. Then they get paired with other volunteers who are available at the same time. They receive an email saying, "Hey! You've been scheduled for a session at this time." Then they sign into the website and connect with one another using a virtual module to help inspire conversation.

YS: When I first joined, I was really impressed by the virtual modules. We currently have over thirty virtual module areas. You can be part of a tour of a museum. You can visit Costa Rica. It's phenomenal. There are modules as well that are simply icebreakers, just getting to know one another. That sparks so much dialogue so quickly. Every volunteer has an onboarding, so there's already a discussion about how dialogue works and how to connect and communicate. It's a unique adventure every time you have a session.

GE: It sounds like there's a peace education component to your onboarding process. Could you tell me a bit more about the role

of peace and conflict studies concepts in your training and modules?

YS: When I joined, a lot of those concepts were already in place, so my goal was to provide feedback and contribute to further curriculum development. When I was in the conflict resolution field, I found that a lot of efforts focused on resolution, but not enough on prevention. What Acquaint does has a lot to do with prevention. Every time you have a dialogue, a connection, online—that's a new opportunity to form who you are, your values, and how you connect to our world.

KM: Yehuda, I think, hasn't talked up his contributions quite as much as we would. We actually just created an Acquaint fellowship for volunteers who get more involved, and we're creating a system of micro-courses for them that go into way more detail on specific topics. Yehuda's basically leading that. He's created the first few courses that the new fellows are going to start out with. We also just got a mini grant from PJSA where Yehuda's spearheading a new virtual module called "Indigenous Stories."

YS: Yes! I'll be heading to the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, which is owned and operated by the Seminole Tribe of Florida, to meet with the elders there. They'll be sharing their perspective and helping us to build the virtual module. The goal of being there is to better

understand their community dynamics and to take photographs to use in the module.

AS: To explain more about our virtual modules, we have these one-on-one sessions that all of Acquaint revolves around. We're trying to add shared activities or goals in these virtual modules over which people can connect. Not only do they serve as conversation starters, but it's something to do together, a kind of journey that you're taking together. Now, those were the original virtual modules. We're starting to explore some other areas, such as a collaborative art icebreaker that's being supported and funded by Atlas Corps, where two volunteers will build a mosaic together. No art talents required! Also, virtual games foster dialogue, so we could incorporate a video game into a module—ideally one designed with human connection in mind.

GE: The theme for this issue is “love.” How does love, broadly understood, play into your work at Acquaint?

KM: One of the things I've noticed through connecting to volunteers on the platform, is that when we take the time to actively listen to someone, to pay attention, and to learn about each other's lives, it's almost impossible not to care about that person. After talking to the person, you want them to be happy, you want them to be successful. It really builds

empathy. People define love in different ways, but one of the definitions could be this: Love for other people means wanting them to be well and happy. That's something I feel on every conversation I've ever had with an Acquaint volunteer.
