

# The TOP 10 REASONS You Know You're a Volunteer

Why volunteer? This exploration of voluntarism goes to the heart of the answer.

BY LINDA MARSHALL

- Reason #10** You don't get paid.
- Reason #9** On a regular basis, your significant other looks at you and says, "Another meeting tonight?"
- Reason #8** You watch the news about the war in Kosovo (or substitute any other world hotspot) and have to tell yourself firmly, "No, you cannot get on an airplane and go over there and help them tomorrow."
- Reason #7** Friends call you and say things like, "We know you'll say yes to anything, so we thought we'd exploit your time and energy just one more time to serve on the Friends of Endangered Crawdaddies committee."
- Reason #6** You have a recurring dream in which you are riding naked on a white horse through a medieval town, giving out bread and wine to the peasants, and having them cheer you on as you make your way to the next hamlet.
- Reason #5** Someone jokes that he was asked to volunteer at his son's school and replied, "Hey, I already gave at the office, har, har, har"—and you fight the urge to grab him by the collar and say, "Go join the PTA—now!"
- Reason #4** If you're single and you meet a nice man (or woman) at a bar one night, and he or she asks what you do in your spare time, by the time you come up for air after telling all about your volunteer activities—said nice man or woman has vanished.
- Reason #3** You go to your 30th high school reunion and your old friends say, "My goodness, you look so young and bright-eyed," and you know it's because you find the kind of fulfillment that volunteering can bring.
- Reason #2** You get to attend a fabulous Volunteer Appreciation Banquet every year.
- Reason #1** At night when you go to sleep, and in the morning when you wake up, you know in your heart that—whatever evils and problems afflict this world—you are making it a better place. You are the reason we can all have faith in the human spirit.

These reasons give us a glimpse into the paradox of volunteering. Let's explore this paradox further.

## A Hunger for Meaning

We live in a world where everything seems to have a price. In these days of managed care—in which insurance companies are actually trying to put a monetary value on nurses' comforting gestures—we seem a step away from having a price tag on every kind word.

We also live in a world jam-packed with books and seminars and infomercials aimed at self improvement. Every bookstore has a big section called "Self Help." You'll find hundreds of books that tell you what to do to make your life more fun, what to get rid of in your life, what to add to your life, how to feel differently about yourself, your family, your hair, your inner child.

This cornucopia of self-help advice never stops coming, and yet it never seems to solve the essential problem of finding meaning in living. The hunger for something substantial is still there 45 minutes after you finish reading about your erroneous zones or your inner waif.

Volunteers know what's wrong with this picture. "Self help"—as a concept and as a pursuit—leaves something out. It leaves out: other people. It presents us with more narcissistic self-absorption, the very thing that creates our hunger for more meaning in the first place.

## The Key to Democracy

America has always been a nation of civic-mindedness, of volunteering, of barn raisings, co-ops, and small town neighborliness. When Alexis de Tocqueville—an aristocratic Frenchman interested in this new nation of democratic ideals—visited America in the early 1800s, he wrote with admiration and amazement at how this great experiment of democracy was succeeding. His two-volume work, *Democracy in America*, examined and praised this young United States and its fierce attachment to a new philosophy of democratic principles.

Tocqueville focused on what he called the problem of individualism. He wondered what would give Americans a sense of belonging, of community, since democracy so emphasizes the individual.

He came from a background of aristocracy, a class-based society of kings and lords, queens and ladies—and, underneath, a mass of peasants. People had no opportunity to change their station in life: They were born into it and stayed there until death. Yet people weren't isolated from one another; they had a strong sense of group membership.

The emergence of a democratic system changed all that. The freedom to change one's economic and social status opened up vast opportunities, while removing the

strong social bonds that had connected people to one another.

As Tocqueville put it, "Aristocracy links everybody, from peasant to king, in one long chain. Democracy breaks the chain and frees each link."

In this new democratic society, Tocqueville wondered: What would give people a sense of responsibility to one another when these individuals—off pursuing life, liberty, happiness, and their own individual freedom—weren't bound to their fellow citizens?

One answer, Tocqueville believed, was in the range of voluntary associations to which people belonged. He said:

As soon as several Americans have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce before the world, they seek each other out, and when found, they unite. Thenceforth, they are no longer isolated individuals, but a power conspicuous from the distance whose actions serve as an example; when they speak, people listen.

Whether it is a case of building a hospital in a small town or of investigating the cause of war, whatever its order of magnitude, a voluntary association will emerge to devote its free time to studying the problem and trying to solve it.

Nothing, in my view, more deserves attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America. In democratic countries knowledge of how to combine with one another is the mother of all other forms of knowledge; on its progress depends that of all the others.

It was people's freedom to join together, to become involved, to tackle common problems, that provided a balance to the unrestrained system of liberty, according to Tocqueville. Individualism tempered by voluntarism was the key to democracy's success.

Even today these two forces often exist in some tension or conflict: individual freedom vs. the need for interdependence, for joining together, for community. In a modern, technological society, the need to connect with others is even greater.

We still see debates around these issues. When Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote her book, *It Takes A Village*—which reflects an African philosophy that children need many resources and supports in addition to the nuclear family—her book was greeted warmly by some and with outrage by others.

The first group supported the notion that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers—that we have a responsibility to help one another, that we can't live in a decent society without some connection to and responsibility for one another.

The second group came from a very individualistic perspective: They reacted with alarm and hostility to the



## Breaking Through

As this painting by a 15-year-old boy with bipolar disorder shows, human caring can break through walls. Many such breakthroughs would never take place without volunteers reaching out to others in need.

The painting is displayed in "Childhood Revealed: Art Expressing Pain, Discovery, and Hope," an exhibit of art created by children who suffer

from mental or emotional disorders. The exhibit is presented by the Mental Health Association of Greater Dallas with support from the Meadows Foundation. Both groups have a history of encouraging volunteerism, challenging people to improve their communities, and linking people to help.

The artist describes his painting, titled "Breaking Through," as follows: "In this painting I am portraying myself on the dark side and other people on the light side. There is a chain in the middle because I used to put up an emotional wall and not let others help me. I used drugs for help instead. Well, now the chain is broken and I let others help. I am not alone anymore."

For more information, contact the Mental Health Association of Greater Dallas, 624 N. Good-Latimer, Suite 200, Dallas, Texas 75204, [mhadallas@mhadallas.org](mailto:mhadallas@mhadallas.org).

idea that "outsiders" (the government or social workers, neighbors or volunteers) have any right to intervene in private family matters. Taken to an extreme, it is this radical individualism that motivates a Timothy McVeigh to blow up a government building.

Voluntarism is the essential link between the solitary individual and fellow human beings—both for those who receive help from volunteers *and* for the volunteers themselves.

Volunteers know this to be the core beauty of volunteering—that all are enriched, helpers and recipients. They know that one day the tables may be turned, and the volunteers will need help from those they've been in a position to assist before. This is the human condition.

There is a certain mystery, and a certain beauty, to this paradox of human need and relationship. The very weakness of the human condition is also its greatest strength. There is terrible suffering in this world, and those who suffer need our help. And, in meeting this need, we experience our deepest humanity: We grow, we become truly rich, in the process. We are transformed. ■

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*Dr. Linda Marshall is program director for the Social Work Program, Department of Sociology and Social Work, P.O. Box 425887, Texas Women's University, Denton, Texas 76204-5887 (940-898-2071) and chair of the Board of Directors of Denton County Friends of the Family, a nonprofit agency that serves victims of sexual assault and domestic violence. This article is adapted from a speech she gave at the Annual Volunteer Appreciation Banquet.*