

Volunteering in America

A Status Report

TEN YEARS IS A LONG TIME. IN our youth-oriented, highly mobile, instant gratification world, it is a particularly long time to be with the same employer.

That fact was brought home to me rather forcefully in January when I completed my tenth year with VOLUNTEER and its predecessor organization, the National Center for Voluntary Action. Admittedly, I have had at least six different titles and accompanied the organization through four different office locations, a merger and a name change (the organization's, not mine) in those years. But it is still a long time.

To mark the occasion, members of our board presented me with *The Gardens at Giverny*, a marvelous photographic tour of Claude Monet's gardens in the small French village of Giverny. Because Maureen and I had visited the gardens last fall, it was a very special reminder of a

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very happy time.

But it also reminded me of the thoughts I had had while at Giverny about the similarities between gardens and our volunteer community.

Like a garden, we enjoy a timeless quality. The need for an active, informed citizenry is as important today in this nation as it has been at any time since our founding—and will continue to be so in the future. The individual acts of caring and sharing that constitute what we call volunteering know no historic or generational limits. They always have happened, wherever there are caring people. They must continue to happen if we are to live humanely and peacefully with ourselves and with each other.

But, also like a garden, volunteering must be renewed constantly. It is not enough to believe that because people always have given of themselves that they will continue to do so, not enough to assume that our innate human goodness always will overwhelm our darker side. We bear a special responsibility—those of us who believe in what citizens can do and who hold dear the values volunteering represents—to nurture and strengthen the attitudes, value system and structures that make volunteering possible.

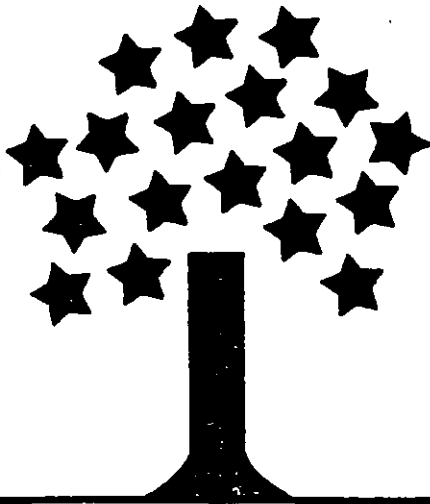
Much has happened to the volunteer community in the last ten years. Here are the five developments I think are most important:

First, we have in fact become a community, one that shares in common a recognition of the need to promote and sup-

port effective volunteering; one that shares some values in common, no matter how much we might disagree on the substance of the issues on which we work. The structures that have been created to help people to volunteer and to help organizations most effectively involve people—Voluntary Action Centers, individual volunteer coordinator positions, DOVIAs, state offices, national organizations—have matured.

Second, we have expanded the definition of volunteering and in the process have begun to dispel the negative stereotypes that the word has carried. Now we seek to embrace those involved not only in service delivery but also in the governance of private organizations and public agencies, in advocacy around social issues, in advocacy for those who cannot speak effectively for themselves, in self-help and mutual assistance. We have learned that our community has many neighborhoods and that volunteering happens in all of them—in human service agencies, in churches, in fraternals, in corporations and labor unions, in grassroots citizen organizations and in thousands of other places. And we've learned that like any community, we can all live together if we try, benefiting from what we have in common and learning from what we do not.

Third, public awareness of volunteering has grown tremendously. I knew we had arrived when Dan Rather prefaced a story by saying that, at CBS News, they like to run stories of people helping each



1984

By
Kenn Allen

other. Unlike politicians, we don't even care whether or not they spell our name right. The important thing is that the stories of citizen action are gaining the kind of national attention they deserve, which in turn will encourage others to get involved. The President of the United States gives awards to outstanding volunteers, even to some who may not agree with him politically. We were the theme of the world's largest media event—the Rose Parade—not because we all lobbied for it, but because a volunteer made the decision to do it. Most important, policy-makers, leaders and the media can no longer overlook the critically important role that individual citizens and their organizations play in solving problems and helping people.

Fourth, we have expanded our relationship with business and government. The emergence of corporate-sponsored volunteer programs for workers is perhaps the most significant development in the volunteer community in recent years. Close behind is the rush of political leaders to encourage, support and seek the help of volunteers. For a change, we have a seat at the table when some of the decisions are made.

Fifth, we have put aside our belief that to be "right," volunteering must be "pure"—that is, undertaken out of strict altruism. We now recognize that volunteering is a mutually beneficial act, helping the helper as well as the consumer. From that recognition is growing new ways of recruiting, training and reward-

Volunteer Voices

Here are some of the things people were saying about volunteering in 1983-84:

"Unfortunately, many liberals have dismissed the virtues of America's long-standing tradition of voluntarism. That each of us bears some personal responsibility to care for society's weakest members and serve our community is a fundamental tenet, not only of our civic tradition but of our Judeo-Christian heritage. It is a responsibility that cannot be discharged simply by contributing to impersonal bureaucracies, either through taxes or giving to the United Way. The essence of voluntarism is not giving part of a surplus one doesn't need, but giving part of one's self. Such giving is more than a duty of the heart, but a way people help themselves by satisfying the deeper spiritual needs that represent the best in all of us."

—*Kathleen Kennedy Townsend in The Washington Monthly, October 1983*

"Our employees see the Involvement Corps office as a service to them. It enables them to get their voluntarism done in a systematic way. For the company, it's an investment. When we decided we were going to remain in downtown Los Angeles, we figured we needed to contribute something to the community. After all, you can't ignore your surroundings."

—*Richard Durkee, Second Vice President for Organizational Development, Transamerica Occidental Life, in the Los Angeles Times, October 14, 1983*

"Together, with this new volunteer force, we will clean up our city, fight crime, attract new talent to government, expand recreation programs, combat our literacy problem and wipe out graffiti."

—*W. Wilson Goode, Mayor of Philadelphia, on his election day*

"I feel so badly that people who have leisure time don't give it to charity. People are completely lacking in community responsibility today. I don't understand it."

—*May L. Linder, a volunteer for 70 years, in the New York Times, October 2, 1983*

"I believe that the more you give of yourself to others, the more you grow. A volunteer is like an astronaut who gains a different perspective of his [her] world.

S/he sees it from a distance and can appreciate where s/he lives."

—*Michael Genovese, Director of Holy Cross High School's Community Service Program, Queens, N. Y., in the Aug./Sept. 1983 American Education.*

"I don't know of any substitute for what the volunteer can do. I'm a great believer in what Woodrow Wilson said, 'The most powerful force on earth is the spontaneous cooperation of a free people.'"

"Volunteerism is an essential aspect of a pluralistic society. If you are going to have a pluralistic, free society, then there has to be the opportunity for individuals to do the things that they think need doing—whether those things involve services to others or whether those things involve issues."

—*George Romney, VOLUNTEER Chairman of the Board, in the Los Angeles Times, January 19, 1984*

"If there ever was a subject which people take for granted and on which they consider themselves experts, it is volunteerism."

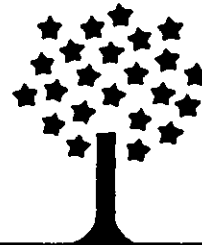
—*Jane Mallory Park in her book, Meaning Well Is Not Enough, Groupwork Today, Inc., 1983*

"The tools of a citizen are families, neighbors, neighborhood organizations, churches, temples, civic organizations, social groups, ethnic societies, political groups, local enterprises, unions, newspapers, governments, schools. These are places where citizens generally are in power. They are the tools with which America built a nation. They are the hammers of community building, the looms that built us into a great people."

—*John McKnight, Associate Director, Center for Urban Affairs, Northwestern University, at the 1983 National Conference on Citizen Involvement*

"If we can walk across fire, why can't we solve some of our basic problems? Why can't we control the proliferation of arms that may destroy us? Do we think, for example, that controlling nuclear arms is the business of a handful of professionals in Washington and Moscow who know better? Do we think that we, as citizens, have no impact? Maybe these are assumptions, just like the assumptions that fire walking is a hoax. We limit our own potential because we exclude it by our beliefs. We can do far more than we think we can."

—*Dick Gunther, L.A. businessman, National Executive Committee Member, Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, and human potential explorer, in the January 1984 Esquire*



ing volunteers, which are expanding the available pool of volunteers by removing artificial barriers to participation. No longer are we embarrassed by the Emerson quote, "It is one of the most beautiful compensations in life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

But there is also much left for us to do. Here are some of the things I think must be high on our agenda:

First, we must work hard to insure that we maintain our political independence. Volunteering is the possession of no single political party, no single ideology. It is not limited in its value by the opinions of elected leaders nor in its impact by the whims of funders, pundits or politicians. We cannot allow the self-anointed to attempt to define what is acceptable volunteer activity, what will receive public praise and what will not. Much like the Bill of Rights, the right and responsibility to volunteer embrace all of us, no matter what partisan label we choose to wear. We must value and nurture the right of everyone to be involved in making decisions and charting our future, whether we agree with them or not.

Second, we must remember that volunteering in the end is a people activity. It is done by real people to help real people solve real problems. Its importance is not simply in the fact that it exists—although its existence is essential to maintaining our freedoms—but in the results obtained. Volunteering represents the most humane and loving aspects of our human nature. We cannot allow organizational turf, infatuation of structure or the inclination to maintain outmoded structures to interfere with the very important entrepreneurial and visionary work of people who as volunteers are finding new ways to get things done.

Third, we must get better at marketing our idea. The best marketing in the voluntary sector is still being done by those who are raising money. But the involve-

ment of volunteer time, talent and energy is at least as important. We are in peril if we do not recognize that a healthy volunteer community is dependent on the ability and willingness of people to volunteer—something that is defined largely by their values and attitudes. We have all that we need to help shape those attitudes, but we must be willing to do it.

Fourth, we need to explore in greater depth the relationship between volunteering and paid work. Without over-intellectualizing, we can begin to see that paid and unpaid work are part of the same continuum. As the world of paid work changes, whether for better or for worse, volunteering will be an increasingly important part of people's lives. Only by understanding the nature of work and our part of it can we make volunteering as beneficial to as many people as it can be.

Finally, we cannot ignore the fact that volunteering is not a value-free activity. Indeed, it represents what is the best of all of us. That means there is a special role for those of us in the volunteer community to play as the world seeks to deal with what seem to be overwhelming human, economic and environmental problems. Too many today, even in the most visible of places, seem to want to denigrate the notion of public service. We cannot stand silent while that happens. Rather, we must believe that it is our values that can help us build a world that provides safety, opportunity and justice for everyone.

This is a bit different than the "status report" I have written each of the past four years. What is the status of volunteering in the United States in 1984? Is it some ill-focused Orwellian reflection of our American heritage of involvement? I think not. Indeed, I would suggest that the following article describes it far better than anything I could write from a national perspective. I commend it to you as a reminder of what all of us are about.

'Big Enough To Be Resourceful, Small Enough To Care'

By Richard Price

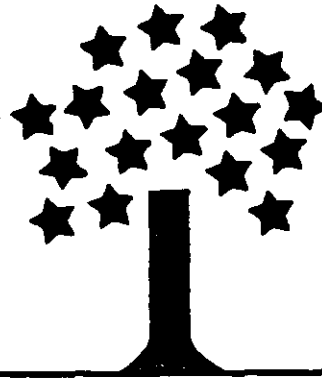
WATERLOO, Iowa—Ray Bagsby is six weeks behind on the mortgage; he'll soon have to raise cash by selling the station wagon. The kids ask why the space under the Christmas tree is a little empty this year. But here he sits at his dining room table with two friends in a similar situation, all of them roaring with laughter.

A mile away, the Walt Wilson home is one person emptier this Christmas—the oldest of six kids, Craig had to find work in Dallas after he was laid off from the John Deere tractor plant here. Still, the clan's annual house-to-house caroling is on; and Christmas is ever-bright for Walt's 3-year-old granddaughter, Liz. "I want a choo-choo, a balloon and a toy elephant," she says.

Says Wilson, 53, hugging her: "We're lucky." Says Bagsby, 33: "I guess what keeps everyone going is the ability to . . . sit around a table with your friends and laugh."

It's Christmas in Waterloo, population 86,000. As in much of the Midwest this year, it's a bitter-cold time—temperatures dropped to 23 below. As in much of the USA, the wounds of recession are more evident still than the balms of recovery—they've lost 12,000 jobs here. As in much of the world, there are worries about escalating tensions—and about Beirut, where one of Waterloo's own was sent.

But the problems miss the point here: the real Christmas story in Waterloo is how this community stands above its problems. It's Bagsby laughing at poor-man jokes. It's Wilson hugging his granddaughter. It's Lance Cpl. Theodore Burt, home from Beirut, "so happy to be here that I can't put it in words."



Even Olivia Jackson, surviving on welfare, discouraged by two years of fruitless job-hunting, has the spirit. Although she gave her 9-year-old daughter a lesson on realities—"I told her that if I can't get her something, she shouldn't be depending on Santa Claus"—she softens later, smiling. ("Oh, I'll get her something. She's not going without.") And Christmas dinner will be a big one—ham, sweet potatoes, all the trimmings.

None of that will push aside 1983 realities. Employment at Deere, the town's biggest employer, has slid from 16,000 to 10,000, and unemployment benefits are running out for thousands of workers who once earned \$12 an hour.

The food stamp lines, filled with people known as victims of "Deere Syndrome," lengthen. And the town's second biggest employer—Rath Packing, meat processors—has filed for reorganization under bankruptcy law.

So parents dig deeper to put toys under the tree. Postman Frank Rolf, who delivers the Christmas cards in Walt Wilson's neighborhood, notices families are doubling up in houses to cut costs. Fewer Christmas lights sparkle on the white, wood-frame houses that cover snow-blanketed hills along the Cedar River.

On the valley floor, a few downtown stores are empty, victims of the economy and a new mall. The icy streets are unusually quiet—the cold has shut everyone indoors, canceling shopping sprees and the concert at Central High.

But the festive signs are there. Wrapped around every lamppost are green and red wreaths, offsetting the tangle of gray factories and soaring smokestacks. Snowmen have popped up in front yards. A huge, lighted Christmas tree stands in stately Highland Park on the town's east side, where the blue-bloods lived until they moved to the west side hills a generation ago and were replaced by middle-class workers like Wilson.

And something else speaks of Christmas here. Retail sales in Waterloo this year climbed 11 percent over a year ago: People seem to find a way.

Bagsby took a clerk's job at 7-Eleven. His two friends at the dining-room table, also laid off from Deere, have resorted to odd jobs. Marvin Isabell, 32, spent a week building a wooden deck for an \$85 profit. John Carr, who has never collected welfare in his 46 years, has been shoveling snow.

Grandparents help out. Marcella Wilson's daughter Ann, 21, can't find a job as a licensed practical nurse to pay for daughter Liz's train, but Marcella made sure she'd get it: "We always manage."

For Marine Theodore Burt, 21, just being here is gift enough. He's one of hundreds enjoying Christmas after surviving the Beirut airport bombing. Topping his plans: a family reunion dinner Sunday. He can't get over all the attention—parades and speeches, yellow ribbons, TV interviews—that welcomed him and other Marines back. Burt probably will go through it once more—his unit is scheduled to return to Lebanon in 1984 for five months. "I don't want to go," he says, "but I'll do what I have to do."

Most people here do what they have to. They get by, and not with desperate

tactics. As in many communities with economic problems, crime has dropped.

There are helping hands all over town. Dave and Audrey Rainey haven't worked for months, but they consider themselves lucky—"at least the house is paid off"—so they came up with canned tomatoes and beans, cheese and eggs for their church's food drive, and plenty of clothes for the Salvation Army.

Donations to the Food Bank, a charity formed two years ago, have jumped sharply. United Way, faced with a \$200,000 loss in payroll deductions, made up half of that because those still on the job increased contributions. The Salvation Army now serves free hot meals five days a week; donations are up to its Toys for Tots program, which distributes Christmas gifts to needy kids.

The Brown Baggers, an organization started by retired union employees, served a free Christmas dinner in the Presbyterian church as its holiday project. They had no trouble finding volunteers. Overwhelmed by donations to their clothing drive earlier this month, the Brown Baggers clothed 7,464 people and still had enough left over to help out another city, Cedar Rapids, 66 miles east.

"It's a great town," says Brown Baggers founder Roger Bleeker, "big enough to be resourceful, small enough to care."

Depart Waterloo with this Christmas portrait:

The Bagsbys with a Christmas ham donated by 7-Eleven. Olivia Jackson watching her daughter unwrap the present she thought she wouldn't get. Burt at the family reunion for the first time in three years—surrounded by people grateful to see him alive. The neighbors' kids running through the Wilson house.

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