

Thoughts at the Re-Dedication of the Time Capsule September 20, 2001

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Hello to everyone present today in Denver at this exciting event. I am very sorry to miss the celebration in person, but please know that I am there in spirit and—through the graciousness of whoever is reading this aloud to you—in words, too!

Having played a small role in the original dedication of this Time Capsule, it is lovely to be a part of the process again. First, because it means we've all survived! And second, it continues to affirm our positive belief that there will be a future in which volunteerism will continue to matter. Time capsules are, like volunteering itself, inherently optimistic. So let's all applaud our insistence that future colleagues will be there when the Capsule is opened and that the field will have moved forward in many ways.

Mary Lou and Ivan have asked me to share some predictions about where volunteerism is headed in the coming decades. It's hard to look ahead without looking back (where have I heard that phrase before?), so the following ideas are reflective as well as clairvoyant. Of course, I never saw the last 25 years coming, so take these predictions with a grain of salt!

Susan Ellis' Guess at the Future of Volunteerism

- No matter what anyone does or does not do, **volunteering** will still be here. This is a certainty. All social change and community innovation has been and will continue to be pioneered by volunteers. This is because change and innovation challenge the *status quo*. Initially change is rarely legislated, funded, or popular—and sometimes it's illegal. Volunteering is bigger and more powerful than any group can define or control.
- Because volunteers are always on the cutting-edge of change, there will be new causes to address. Just as recent decades saw the unexpected rise of AIDS organizations, hospices, anti-school violence projects, and other reactions to real needs, the future will bring similar responses. Right now volunteers are incredibly active on the Internet as website developers, privacy advocates, and international networkers. Will we see matchmaking services for active seniors over age 100? Activity programs for people working on the moon? Support groups for teenagers with three sets of step-parents and a surrogate mother? Look into your crystal ball....
- There will also be new ways for volunteers to serve. In the past decade, one-time service "days" have become popular and are introducing new audiences to volunteering. Now the challenge is evolving one-day service into more sustained effort. Also, Internet technology brought us "virtual volunteering"—the first truly

innovative form of service in decades. As we move into the future, we will learn the potential of online service, finally become skilled at involving families as team volunteers, and become more creative in designing short-term, high-impact assignments

- For the last quarter century, we have called volunteer program management “an emerging profession.” Today, people stay in the volunteerism field longer--and more often as an active career choice. I would hope that the 21st century will bring more positions for volunteer program managers and increased opportunities for someone to become educated in best practices. But we'll only be a “profession” if people embrace this work as a calling and as their identity, not simply as a “job.”
- One of the biggest challenges we began to tackle in recent years is going beyond educating ourselves to educating others. In-house advocacy is an increasingly important part of the role of volunteer program manager. This includes teaching executives about what it takes to create the right organizational climate for successful volunteer involvement, plus training paid staff and volunteers to work effectively as a team. I wish I could predict we won't have to do this in the future, but I worry that we still might. I further hope we will make inroads into the education of related professions, so that nurses, social workers, teachers and others will be taught volunteer supervision modules integrated into their professional training curricula.
- Volunteering-related professional societies, whether local groups such as DOVIAs or national associations, are struggling but often succeeding. The most exciting development today is the formation of such societies of directors of volunteer services in other countries. Japan and Australia are just two places where I witnessed the birth of such efforts in 2001. I predict that our colleagues in more and more countries will organize themselves. As Ivan Scheier has always told us, strong DOVIAs remain the most accessible entry point for new members of the profession and the groups with the most potential to move volunteerism forward. I also predict that a new American association will be created, as AVA focuses more on the international scene and colleagues in the United States are left without a national voice.
- In 1977 there were only two (yes, two) books in English available on the subject of volunteer administration. Today there are over 200 books, several journals, and training audio and videotapes. While unfortunately it is still impossible to find these resources in local bookstores, the Internet has suddenly made everything accessible to everyone. Some of the best and certainly the most current information available today is found on the Web-at sites developed around the world. In the future, it should be possible for all newcomers to get themselves up to speed easily, and for advanced practitioners to engage in stimulating exchange with colleagues anywhere.
- The Internet is as profound a change in the way we communicate as was the invention of the telephone. I can't predict the specifics of technology advances, but the Web is here to stay and will grow in important to volunteerism. Not only will we be able to affect the image and messages the public sees about volunteering, but the Web will

help us to strengthen our profession. As a trainer, I look forward to the day when I can sit in my office and offer live online training, plus streaming video, real time programs, and conference simulcasts from anywhere in the world.

- We have to acknowledge that more and more people and groups have divested themselves from the word "volunteer" as old-fashioned, non-inclusive, and irredeemably amateur. Today's volunteers are just as likely to consider their unpaid work as "community service" or to respond to labels such as "activist." Academics and politicians debate "civil society" and "social capital." In the future, we may further limit use of the word "volunteer," but community resource mobilization by any name will smell as sweet!
- Interest in both school-based service by students and extracurricular volunteering by young people reached an all-time high during these past 25 years, and show no signs of abating. Future issues to resolve include how to involve youth in agency decision-making, particularly on boards of directors, and how to overcome resistance to the youngest helpers. I am very curious to see whether requiring all those boys to do community service will result in adult men as willing to be carers as trustees!
- The aging of the world's population will force us to become more creative in how to involve talented seniors at all three stages of aging: pre-and post-retirement, middle aging, and over 90!
- Current concern for risk and liability is the panic button of our field, fueled by misinformation and worst-case scenario thinking. Too often agencies have practiced risk avoidance, not risk management, assuming that volunteers inherently create greater risk. U.S. colleagues ought to know that colleagues in other countries blame us for spreading the fear of lawsuits--and they may be right! Legal restrictions have grown in all countries, especially in requirements for screening volunteers. Some new resources are emerging, including volunteer protection legislation or (in some nations) free or eased access to records. If we cannot overcome the fear of risk, the future is bleak.
- I wonder whether we will still be tackling the split between the agency-based volunteer community and the all-volunteer membership association world. This is a collaboration opportunity still waiting to happen.
- Finally, I think foundations and other funders will start to require--and fund--agency volunteer involvement plans.

All in all, I think it will be a very intriguing century to come, don't you? May we all play a role in forming the future we most prefer!

Susan