

## Association for Volunteer Administration Distinguished Member Service Award Acceptance Speech

Susan J. Ellis

*At the 1989 International Conference on Volunteer Administration, Susan J. Ellis was presented with AVA's Distinguished Member Service Award. Ms. Ellis is President of ENERGIZE ASSOCIATES, a training, consulting, and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. She is based in Philadelphia but has conducted training sessions throughout North America and in Ecuador. Susan is the author or co-author of numerous books and articles, including FROM THE TOP DOWN: THE EXECUTIVE ROLE IN VOLUNTEER PROGRAM SUCCESS. She was Editor-in-Chief of The Journal of Volunteer Administration from 1981 to 1987 and still serves as Manuscripts Developer.*

Thank you for this award and for your ovation. There are a lot of people in this room for whom I have deep affection and admiration and it is always the best to be recognized by your peers. At the VIP table in front of me are three people whom I would like to include in this recognition, since they have all supported my AVA work. First is my mother, Ann Ellis, who at this conference as at numerous others is a semi-coerced volunteer in the exhibit area and who can sell my books to potential customers as only a proud mother can. Next is Katie Noyes, who has been my colleague, co-author and friend for eighteen years and whose connection to this association is as deeply felt—and proven by hard volunteer work—as mine. Last, but only in terms of longevity of relationship, is my colleague and husband John Paul Dalsimer who has supported me through six years of rollercoaster feelings about AVA, has been an *ad hoc* accounting consultant to this association, and who is doing yeoman duty handling the financial end of the Resource Marketplace here. Thank you and love to all three of you.

This award is given for work specifically on behalf of AVA, which translates into work on behalf of the professional development of our field. I would like to use my ten minutes, therefore, to share with you some of my very strong feelings about where we are going as a profession and as an organization.

As you are well aware, the debate continues as to whether or not volunteer administration is, in fact, a profession. While I certainly spend my entire working life (and volunteer life, too) expending effort to bring us along professionally, I must tell you that if you pinned me to the wall today and asked, "Susan, is volunteer administration a profession?" I'd have to answer: "Not yet."

Why? Because the existence of the job title of "director of volunteers" does not mean that we have come of age. We have a long way to go in terms of educational criteria and the other underlying supports evident in accepted professions. But my biggest reservation is our own attitudes, behavior, and perspectives about our selves.

A profession is an identity one assumes as a result of education, experience, and commitment. It is not a job; it is a career. Neither one's title nor setting matters, nor even if you're paid to do it. For example, a lawyer is a lawyer whether or not she or he practices in a law firm or acts as Director of Risk Management at a hospital. As long as we think that people enter or leave our ranks because of their job titles, we are not a profession. This means that our members should retain their membership in AVA even when "pro-

moted" out of front line volunteer directing. Every executive director of an agency who at one time was trained as a director of volunteers is still in this field—you can take a person out of volunteerism, but you can't take volunteerism out of a person.

So think about it. Are you a member of AVA as one stop in what you consider as a career? Or is this an organization—and a possible profession—to which you intend to belong in the long term?

Is your professional identity generic, as an enabler of citizen participation or as a community resource mobilizer (which I think it is), or do you think your profession is connected to whether you work in a museum or in a nursing home? Be honest.

A profession is made up of individuals, not of agency representatives. No matter what job you hold, and whether or not your employer will pay your membership dues, your identity as a volunteer administrator is yours, personally. This means that it is no excuse to say, "I can't go into the Resource Marketplace because my agency won't pay for any books." No one buys you a career. If this is your profession, then keeping up with the trends and issues and writings is *your* responsibility, for yourself. You should want to OWN these resources, not to have to leave them behind when you change jobs. (Yes, this is a commercial to buy in the Resource Marketplace.) Professional development means continuing education—a hallmark of every other profession.

In my swan song editorial in *The Journal of Volunteer Administration* I exhorted more members to write as well as to read. This July 4th, as Katie [Noyes] and I finished yet another holiday spent writing our revision of *By the People*, we agreed that it was darn hard to find the time to add to the reservoir of knowledge about our field. I do not know one author who has been able to write "on the job." It takes private time . . . but then again, professional identity is a personal thing.

Professions operate on articulated philosophies, accepted definitions, and an ethical code of behavior. Practical skills are certainly important, but they are not the distinguishing characteristics of a profession. Technicians limit themselves to skills and competencies. Among the things I have done for AVA that I consider to have been a real contribution is that, when I was the first Board Chairwoman of Professional Development, I fought for that section in the certification portfolio on "Philosophy of Volunteerism" and insisted that it be a preliminary piece and not something done at a later stage of the process.

We in volunteer administration are facing enormous challenges right now to our philosophies, definitions and ethics. Where do we stand—as an association and as individuals—on Bush's 1,000 points of light? on national service and its connection to unrewarded volunteering? to the arguments of labor unions, particularly in Canada? to the succinctly articulated vision of the American Red Cross' "Volunteer 2000" Study? Being a professional means forming opinions on all of these critical current issues and then articulating them and fighting for them. In all the press about national service, for example, I've seen precious few volunteer administrators voicing an opinion. . . . *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* (dated July 11, 1989) at least found AVA, but I do not think that our executive director should speak for the members of the profession and it was he who was quoted.

In the past two years about a dozen universities have founded some sort of "Center on Nonprofit Management" or "Philanthropy." In almost none of these is volunteer management mentioned as a curriculum topic. Has AVA responded? New money has come into the philanthropic field. Independent Sector claims to speak for increased volunteering as well as increased dollar giving—and make no mistake about it . . . we are very much a part of philanthropy and even of fundraising. And we are a vital, critical part. Where is AVA on these planning and advisory bodies?

We currently have little influence or clout for a variety of reasons, some of which in fact relate to sexism. But we have also not advocated for our place at the table, for the unique perspective we represent on behalf of the thousands of volunteers we enable. I believe no new initiative involving volunteers should be allowed to surface without comment from AVA. We need task forces of our members formulating positions, regional committees working with state and provincial governments, constant press releases.

Where at this conference are we caucusing on the important subjects facing us and the volunteers we lead? There was a time then AVA had a public issues "track." That was laid down because our members kept saying, "Give us more skill building." That may be useful, but alone it isn't *profession-building*. Coming to a national conference should be an opportunity to learn about things of national import affecting our field and to CONTRIBUTE to the discussion on all of this.

Which brings me to our annual meetings. Tomorrow at 2:30 p.m. we will have the 1989 annual meeting of AVA. I hope to goodness that it will be different than in the past few years. Our annual meetings have unfortunately grown to be dull, non-participatory and even a bit insulting. I'm tired of going through the motions of credentialling and then not having anything to vote on . . . especially when the times we are in cry out for our reaction and response as volunteer administrators.

Let me make one thing absolutely clear: the purpose of parliamentary procedure is to insure a democratic meeting in which all can speak equally. It is NOT to stifle discussion nor to make members so afraid of parliamentary protocol that they do not take the microphone. Tomorrow, it is up to all of us to make sure that people *speak* at the meeting. If they do not verbalize their remarks into perfect parliamentary language, we'll listen to the sense of what they say and then help them to rephrase it for a vote. But what is most important is input . . . participation . . . discussion . . . debate . . . even controversy. We cannot, of course, fully deal with complex issues in the annual meeting, but it should be a culmination of work we are doing as an association throughout the year.

For next year, maybe we'll even receive an agenda of the annual meeting in advance, and maybe "Update" will become the forum for sharing of topics important to consider. Maybe our regions will be the intermediary ground at which issues and responses can be formulated. And we need to find ways to tap into the thinking of our marvelous affiliates.

AVA is NOT an agency, it is a professional membership association. We are in great danger of having the board think of it as an agency, the staff think of it as an agency, and the members think of it as an agency. An agency is run by a volunteer board of directors that is self-perpetuating and has the ultimate authority—legally—to make final decisions for that organization. AVA's board is elected by its members and is ultimately responsible to its membership. The reason we have an annual meeting is that it is a legal requirement and because it was meant to be the time that the members expressed their wishes. Over the past few years, the membership has been divested of its proper authority. The board, and the staff, are empowered to act on behalf of AVA on any matters implementing goals already accepted or on something requiring immediate action. ANYTHING ELSE must come before the membership in some way.

It is a poor argument to say that only a small percentage of the members are present at annual or regional meetings or that many members do not seem to want more involvement. It is only these meetings at which any member has the chance for input. Those who are most active will come and participate. Last year, after an annual meeting at which the only vote was what to name this conference, the next issue of *Update* told us that the AVA board had voted on several "positions." None of these was controversial, but none was an emergency either. Why was not the *membership* asked to vote on AVA's position? Last year's member luncheon asked for discussion of "Corporate Goals" that were already IN PRINT. What effect have any of us seen since that luncheon of our input? And just because we are *incorporated* should not make our model the *corporation*! As firmly as I can say it, we the membership cannot allow the board or the staff to determine the DIRECTION of AVA. They are elected or hired to handle the important work of implementation and to make all the nitty gritty decisions of how to achieve goals. And they work amazingly hard at that. But the profession belongs to all of us. We simply must find ways to re-empower our members.

I realize that I am violating one of the unwritten rules of awards acceptance . . . by criticizing the group that is trying to thank me. It is important to me that this not be heard as some sort of personal attack on the AVA board because it is not. It should be evident to you all that I can honestly say "some of my best friends are officers of this

association." I do my work on behalf of AVA because I care about the organization and because I see this as a way to contribute to my EMERGING profession. AVA allows me to be a volunteer . . . an activist . . . on behalf of the field. It is a very different dimension than what I am able to do as a consultant or trainer. Maybe, then, I am showing how much I care about all of us by risking this speech. AVA is veering from its course and I want to grab the wheel and the brakes while there is still time.

But I cannot do it alone. Every one of you must make up your mind. First, what is your level of commitment to this field? Is this a job or a career for you? Are you willing to give some personal time and even personal funds to this field because it is your identity? What is your level of commitment to AVA? Are you willing to be active on regional committees? To write for *The Journal*? To run for office?

What is your level of commitment to this emerging profession? Do you see its potential and the importance of citizen involvement? Do you have an opinion about where it should be going? *Form one*, and then express it.

If you truly want to honor my work for AVA then you will raise your level of participation by some degree. I want a mile . . . I'll take an inch. Come to the AVA annual meeting tomorrow and make it worth everybody's while. Let's build this profession together. Thank you.