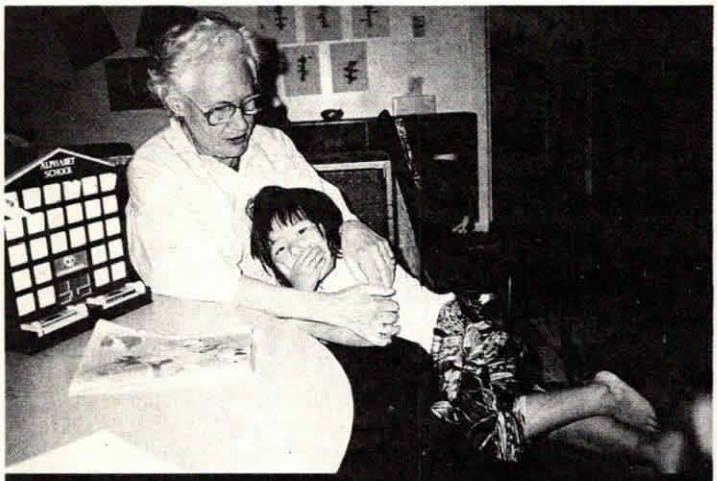
I WAS A POINT OF LIGHT

Is it possible to make a difference? My mission was to find out.

In January 1989, when President Bush suggested that we could solve many of America's social problems if each of us would become one of "a thousand points of light," lots of people were left in the dark. The message was certainly clear: Volunteering is good for the country. The messenger was certainly sincere. But what did it mean? Is it possible to simply go out, take on the problem of your choice and make a difference? After two years of hearing President Bush's phrase chanted almost like a mantra, I set out to find out. I would become a point of light.



'Helper's calm' is to the Nineties what runner's high was to the Eighties

Let your own light shine *(clockwise from left):* Intrepid reporter John Davidson discovered a wide range of volunteer opportunities, from delivering food and comfort to shut-ins to working in day-care centers.

The Bay-area blues

My quest began successfully enough when I called the National Volunteer Center in Arlington, Virginia, which coordinates 380 local Voluntary Action Centers and has recently merged with the Points of Light Foundation to form a sort of Peace Corps for the Bush Administration. I told them that I wanted to do volunteer work in San Francisco, Chicago and my hometown, Austin, Texas, and they provided a list of contacts for each.

Right away, in San Francisco, I learned something fundamental about not-for-profit organizations: They're often understaffed, which means phones sometimes aren't answered and calls aren't always returned. When you do get through, you're likely to find that the organization is most in need of administrative help—stuffing envelopes, answering phones—or that it requires its volunteers to undergo training before they can work.

Rob Stengel and Leila Bongato at The Volunteer Center of San Francisco had lined up eighteen volunteer organizations that said they could use me, but I had worked halfway through the list before I found someone willing to put me to work. Habitat for Humanity, the ecumenical Christian organization that builds houses for low-income families, was putting up four new houses in Richmond, a poor community thirty minutes north of San Francisco. Before I knew it, I was balanced on two rafters fifteen feet above the ground, helping lay the subflooring in one of the houses.

I was about the closest anyone on the crew came to being a yuppie. Most of the twelve men were somewhere in their sixties. There was a middle-aged black man from Berkeley who, having lost his job, was trying to brush up his carpentry skills, and there was one college student whose planned summer job disappeared when a real estate agency went out of business. In my immediate group of four, we had a grandfatherly professor from a seminary in Berkeley who was on his summer vacation, a high school student from San Francisco and a man who had been

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BY JOHN DAVIDSON

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Just do it

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Tutors are carefully matched with students to make learning easier.

What you can do First you have to go through an eighteen-hour training program, after which you will be expected to tutor for two hours per week. Volunteers are also needed in organizational, administrative and fund-raising capacities.

Where to start Contact the national volunteer hot line at 800-228-8813.

National Audubon Society
950 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022
What it does Not just for the birds, this conservation group has been in existence since 1905. It has more than five hundred chapters and is dedicated to helping and protecting all wildlife, natural habitats and the environment. It manages and protects eighty wilderness areas throughout the U.S.

What you can do Volunteers are needed to monitor acid rain, save wetlands, help with recycling programs and teach Audubon educational programs at local elementary schools.

Where to start Call the national office at 212-546-9100.

Special Olympics International
1350 New York Ave., NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005
What it does Special Olympics sponsors year-round sports training and athletic competition for 750,000 individuals with mental retardation worldwide, both children and adults. The Olympic-style events provide participants with not only new skills, but also a sense of accomplishment—not to mention a world of new friends.

What you can do There's something for almost everyone. You can coach or organize or manage or officiate or just "hug." There are more than a half million volunteers already involved, and still more are needed.

Where to start Check your local phone book; or contact the international headquarters at 202-628-3630.

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forced into early retirement. Ethan, the student, had volunteered because he was too young to hold a real job. For all practical purposes we were a group of under-employed men who were working for free or, rather, for the simple pleasure of being occupied. In fact, national trends show an increase in the number of men and young people who volunteer. Almost as many men now volunteer as women.

The area around the construction site looked desolate, as if the mainstream of life had simply passed it by. Habitat for Humanity believes it can help stabilize the neighborhood and prevent it from becoming more run-down and hopeless by building these houses and selling them at a cost that four carefully selected families—two white and two black—can afford.

After I had been working a while, I began to feel the first intimations of "helper's calm," that subtly euphoric state that is to the Nineties what sexual afterglow was to the Seventies and runner's high was to the Eighties. I had read all the stories about how doing good for others would dramatically increase my life expectancy and vitality, and now my endorphins (those opiates for all seasons) were kicking in. Like the millions of new volunteers across the country, I was getting high on doing good.

As the afternoon wore on, I couldn't help but notice a group of young men hanging out in front of an old apartment building across the street where, according to our project foreman Paul Farrell, the residents dealt in prostitution and illegal drugs. We volunteers were getting so much satisfaction out of working, I thought it was a shame there aren't more programs capable of training and employing the alienated and perennially unemployed, a task that volunteer agencies simply aren't equipped to do.

Big shoulders, big problems
Habitat was the only truly successful experience I had in San Francisco. Most of the organizations I approached were eager for publicity but otherwise had no use for me. I began to think that I simply hadn't been emphatic enough about what I was after. Chicago had to be better. I had spoken to Donna Dixon, a coordinator at The Volunteer Network, who said that she and her coworkers placed one thousand volunteers a year. Surely she'd be able to find work for me.

If my troubles in San Francisco had given me reason to be skeptical about volunteer organizations, Dixon made it clear how flaky we volunteers could look from their point of view. She and her colleagues try to match volunteers' skills and interests with an organization's needs, but volunteering, like all things, often succumbs to what is trendy. "For a while we were swamped with people who wanted to work with cocaine babies," says Dixon, "so the hospital has a year's waiting list for those volunteers.

"And there are those who are not willing to go where the need is," she says. "I was working with some women who wanted to volunteer at a shelter, but they wanted to do it in a nice neighborhood. I told them, 'I'm sorry, but I can't find you a shelter in Oak Brook.'"

Even when an organization does get the volunteers and the project together, there's no guarantee of success. For my first assignment, Dixon set me up with a group of teenagers to clean up a backyard for a woman who had been confined to a wheelchair for forty-six years. When I arrived, two women from Chicago's Department on Aging were standing in front of the house looking distressed. They said that the backyard was more of a project than anyone had anticipated, and the teenagers had already left. While they discussed the need for heavy equipment and the possibility of snakes, Dixon and I inspected what appeared to be a forty-six-year-old thicket of weeds and brush that had grown up behind the house. The cleanup would eventually get done, but not today.

My afternoon assignment was much more fruitful. I was to help serve dinner at the Olive Branch, one of the oldest men's shelters in Chicago and a main stop on "tramp trail," the route the men take as they go from shelter to shelter

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is to drop in for a day and have a meaningful experience. To be truly successful you have to make a long-term commitment, to consider your own skills and to decide what you really want to do. Stuffing envelopes is important and someone has to do it, but every volunteer coordinator I talked to said that isn't really what volunteering is about; that if you don't want to do something, just say no. Otherwise, you'll never stay with a project.

So when Mills returned with another stack of papers to copy, I gave them back to her and said, "Thanks, but I hate copying machines."

Editor's note: Want to volunteer? Call the Points of Light Foundation, 800-677-5515, or send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Volunteer–The National Center, 111 N. 19th St., Suite 500, Arlington, VA 22209.

John Davidson's work has appeared in Texas Monthly, Vanity Fair *and* Mirabella.

Panic attack

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divorce, financial reversal or a shift of residence to trigger an attack, says Gregory McFadden, M.D., Ph.D., director of panic and anxiety disorders for the Feighner Research Institute in San Diego, California.

Once an anxiety disorder strikes, what can be done about it? While there is some dispute between psychiatrists who tend to favor pharmacological solutions and psychologists who prefer such nondrug intervention as talk therapy and behavior modification, most specialists believe that some combination of the two approaches is best.

Drugs certainly can be helpful in neutralizing the panic attack to the point where it can be addressed by psychological means. Benzodiazepines such as Valium, Librium and Xanax are known to have rapid calming effects, but only Xanax has been cleared by the Food and Drug Administration expressly for panic attacks. It is currently the most widely used drug treatment. Unfortunately, according to a study reported in 1988 in *Archives of General Psychiatry*, Xanax has only a 50 percent success rate.

Antidepressants like Nardil and Prozac reduce panic, but unlike the benzodiazepines, they require some weeks to reach effective strength. A beta blocker like Inderal gives temporary relief by shutting down the peripheral nerves that send adrenaline to the heart muscles and thereby eliminating that unmistakable heart-racing feeling of fear.

All of these drugs can produce some unpleasant side effects, such as drowsiness, dizzy spells, confused thinking and sexual impairment. And they can be dangerous in combination with other chemicals, chiefly alcohol.

The nondrug treatments are considerably more successful and, of course, have no chemical side effects. There are a variety of techniques, but most rely on systematic desensitization, a process designed to break the mental link the patient has established between her suffering and the supposed environmental trigger, be it a subway ride or crossing a bridge. The method usually starts with relaxation training, which both counters the effects of prolonged anxiety and establishes a kind of emotional ground zero for the patient. Then she is gradually taken up the steps of what is termed the "anxiety hierarchy" until she has come to terms with her worst fears. For someone afraid of flying, this might start with simply seeing the word *airplane*, then a picture of an airplane, and finally confronting the terror of actually being in an airplane that is hurtling down the runway. At each stage, the patient learns to counter her mounting anxiety by consciously turning her mind away from her fears to some relaxing mental image, like lying on the beach in the sun. With practice, the patient starts to feel a new sense of control over her disorder. She gains confidence that, despite her worst fears, she's *not* going to die if she steps into that elevator or that airplane.

The psychologist David H. Barlow, Ph.D., director of the Phobia and Anxiety Disorders Clinic, SUNY at Albany, takes a slightly different tack. He argues that attacks brought on by an anxiety disorder are provoked by real physical sensations, which the sufferer mislabels as panic; the mistake then brings on the real thing. To counter this impression, Dr. Barlow creates the same sensations that led to the panic attack by swirling the patient in a chair to the point of dizziness or having her exercise until her pulse is racing. Without the fear to sustain them, the symptoms gradually subside and the patient begins to recognize these feelings for what they are.

Finally, it is also possible to ease the anxiety disorder victim's fears through cognitive restructuring, which is a matter of replacing negative thoughts ("Oh God, I'm going to die") with positive ones ("Hey, I'll be okay"). The idea is that if the negative thoughts can be restrained, then the panic reaction might be tamed as well.

Which brings us back to *Starting Over*. Had big Burt calmed himself in Bloomingdale's with serene thoughts of Jill Clayburgh, he might not have needed the Valium. That's the real lesson of anxiety: It's a battle of mind over medication. □