4 VOLUNTEERS

Who Know What's in It for Them

I've always done three types of work, I guess... the paid work, whatever the paid work was; family—I have raised two daughters by myself for eight to nine years; and the community stuff—I don't consider that volunteer, I sort of consider it my obligation.
—Roseann Navarro,*
volunteer

THE STEREOTYPIC VOLUNTEER IS A married woman who never works for money. Her first allegiance is to her family; her husband pays the bills while she looks after the children and the home and spends her free time helping out in the community. She is a traditional family woman for whom volunteering is also a job that fulfills a profound need for work outside the home.

But there are the women who volunteer and also have full-time, paying jobs and professional careers. Not generally associated with "volunteering," they are likely to be called, and to call themselves—civic leaders, organizers, and activists. For women who earn their own living, volunteering is not a source of conflict, nor a symbol of dependency. These women don't have to wonder if they are capable of supporting themselves as do many volunteers who don't work for pay.

Women who are both paid professionals and volunteers donate their time and expertise for the pleasure of it and out of a sense of personal, social, or political obligation. For some who have been lucky enough to find salaried jobs in their fields, it is hard to distinguish between the work they do for money and for free. They use their professional skills and contacts volunteering; it is an extension of their professional lives. For others, volunteering and paid work are unrelated: one pays the rent, the other provides the kind of satisfaction that only comes from doing freely chosen work, in pursuit of an ideal or in service to a chosen community. And sometimes volunteering is simply a way of getting what you want. "How else would you get things done if you weren't involved?"

*Not her real name. The names of the women interviewed for this article have been changed to protect their privacy and that of their families.

ROSEANN NAVARRO

Roseann Navarro, now in her early thirties, has been working to support herself since she was in her teens. She is director of a community health center in Hartford, Connecticut, a community volunteer on the side, and until her recent remarriage, single mother of two teenage girls. She is also a part-time law student, intent on succeeding in the professional world so that she can "get involved on a much higher level... to advocate for change." She sees herself as a "community participant": "the kind of work we see people doing in our community, we just think that's part of what they do, part of living on that block." Still, Navarro doesn't mind being called a volunteer. She is proud of her commitment to "helping out": it is, she says, part of her upbringing and her culture.

"I was raised in New York City in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in which very few people knew English, especially the older people. So when people had to go to hospitals or any of the institutions, I would be dragged along as an interpreter. I was about nine years old when I started interpreting. And I got to be real good so that everybody wanted me to go with them to the welfare department, to the health department, to the school, wherever it was. And that was to me the beginning of

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One hospital administrator does not use volunteers on her staff: "That's a job loss for the community."

what I would consider volunteerism."

It was time-consuming but worth her while. "I learned a lot through it, especially verbal skills in both languages, which was an asset then and is an asset now. Having to interpret, I had to go back and forth in both languages, and it really improved and helped me to maintain my Spanish." It also "started" her in health and hospital work. Most of the interpreting was "hospital-related, either in an emergency room or a clinic. The hospitals didn't have bilingual people."

Navarro got her first full-time paid job, as a hospital interpreter, when she was 18. Previously, she'd married and had her first child at 17, her second a year later, and moved with her husband from New York to Hartford, where she started working in an emergency room.

"I didn't like the job . . . first time in my life I felt oppressed. I was the only paraprofessional in the unit—everybody else was a professional, a social worker, a doctor, or something like that. And I felt I was treated very differently from everybody else." She turned to a Manpower center, a federally funded job-training program, which eventually led her to paid "professional" jobs as a community worker and organizer; but it was a slow, arduous step-by-step process. She had dropped out of high school, had to get an equivalency diploma, and took college courses "on the side" for years, in order to get her B.A. Her first opportunity to do some "professional" work was teaching a math class at the Manpower center, as a volunteer. "I had very good math skills and their math teacher quit on them, and one of my counselors said, 'Teach this class until we can get a teacher, and in the meantime we'll try to get you a job.' They were paying me as a participant, but I was actually teaching. I loved it. What bothered me was the fact that I wasn't getting paid as a teacher."

It also bothered the director of the center, who "blew up" when he found out what she was doing and hired her as a Manpower community worker. "This was similar to a social worker, but they called them field-workers. I think they wanted to pay them less, that's why they did that. . . . It was minimum wage at that time, about two dollars and fifty cents. It was a horrible situation, but that's what started me off in the community. I always saw things as another step. I always had a sense of moving along."

Navarro's job as a field-worker meant working with community groups. She became involved in a number of organizations in the black and Puerto Rican communities, and the lines between volunteering and paid work blurred.

"On my paid job I was basically helping families get services—health services, fighting with teachers because they suspended somebody's kid, translating, interpreting. If their welfare check was cut off, I was calling the social worker—being an advocate for people, individual families.

"In my community work, it was not on an individual basis. If I worked on housing, it was housing for the neighborhood, not getting an apartment for an individual person. If I worked on education, it was trying to deal with the educational system and how it relates to Hispanic or black children."

By now Navarro was in her early twenties, in the middle of a divorce, and had two little girls: "I don't think I've ever felt I should be paid for the things I've done in the community. I've always felt: 'This is your community, you should be giving something back to it.' I needed a better income at the [paid] work I was doing. In the beginning, I had other little jobs I had to do because the money wasn't enough to support my family."

She was then "very resentful," and now that Navarro is an administrator herself, making a "good salary" as director of her own agency, she still resents the fact that her field-workers are paid so little. "Every job I had in the community always required extra time that you never got paid for. And the first few jobs were very hard because you got paid nothing and you had to do fifty or sixty hours a week of work. Well, that's a lot of work. Should I be paid less because I happen to like what I'm doing? Why should I be paid less than the social worker, because that social worker has a degree and I don't? Maybe I'm even a little more successful than that social worker because I come from the community. I know the problems. I know the resources. So maybe I can move a little faster. Community organizers get paid nothing. And they do very important work, but they're not recognized."

Navarro is well known as a "community participant" who knows her way through the social service system, so she is always "getting calls" from people for help. "I get calls at home, someone says, 'Are you Roseann Navarro? Somebody told me to call you. I have this problem. . . . Could you help me?' It could be anything, and then you end up working with these families for whatever time period—evenings, weekends. And I've done a lot of that. I still do a lot of that. I've done counseling with women around issues of separation and divorce, or women who want to work and don't want to be home any more. A woman may be having problems with her spouse because her spouse doesn't want her to go for education or doesn't want her to take on that job and feels threatened by her. I've done counseling around that, and that's been on a more personal basis. I get counseling and I give counseling."

This is not "volunteering," she says. It is simply fulfilling an obligation, and it is a relief from her paying job: "I'm an administrator here. I spend my time on budgets and fiscal matters, supervisory stuff. That's not what I like to do best. I like working with people and I also want to change the system, and I find that in working with families I have contact with the institutions and I can do my little advocacy and do my little pressuring at different levels at different points. It has worked on some level. I don't think I've created any big changes in any institution, but it gives me that opportunity. Most of us have no choice. We've got to do it. We've got to do these things. It is my duty as a resident to participate in those activities that affect

Volunteers "save the political process from paid media consultants and professional organizers."

my people and my community. Someone should be making those demands on me."

ELLIE PETERSON

A typical day for Ellie Peterson runs from about 8:30 in the morning to 10 at night. She works an eight-hour day as a hospital administrator in charge of ambulatory and emergency room services, and spends most of her evenings at meetings. Peterson serves on the boards of about 20 community groups that are involved in a variety of development and service projects, and she is active in her political party. All her work, paid and unpaid, is centered in the community. She has three priorities as a volunteer: youth, employment, and economic development.

"I never said, 'I have free time and I think I'll give it to the community,' " she explains. "It's just that there was a need. Somebody needed to organize and talk about youth employment, for example. I was one of those. It was my interest; it kind of evolved." Her community work began about 25 years ago, in the most ordinary way, with PTA volunteering when her children were young.

Peterson had worked for money as a teenager and continued working after her marriage, but her husband insisted she quit her job when their first child was born; they had four sons, and she stayed out of the paid work force for about 10 years. "I was president of the PTA, and we did some very dynamic things in that school. We were one of the strongest PTAs in the city," she recalls. She became politically active, eventually serving a term on the Hartford City Council, and began volunteering in "areas of special concern," working with youth in her community. When her youngest son was six years old, Peterson embarked on a paid career in community services, working with antipoverty and youth employment programs throughout the 1960s, until she took her present job in 1969.

Peterson approaches her job at the hospital as both a paid professional and a volunteer: "If I belong to an organization, I become the link between the hospital and that organization, that way they don't have to look for who they want to speak to in this institution. I become the community's link to the institution."

Peterson draws lines between the kind of work that ought to be done by volunteers and the kind that ought to be salaried. She does not use volunteers on her staff at the hospital: "I had one woman who begged me to let her volunteer for a position that I had in the emergency room. But I told her I couldn't let her do that for long because the hospital would take that position away from me, and that's a job loss for the community. I know the politics in this institution, if they found that I could staff that emergency room. I said to her: 'Once we get the job filled, and you want to come back as a volunteer, fine.' "

Peterson has avoided this kind of conflict in her own career as a volunteer, because she has never volunteered for a service job in an institution. She does, however, do some individual service work, providing informal career counseling to teenagers. This is, perhaps, the one volunteer job that is not "geared around" her professional career. "I share my information. I've done that mostly with teenagers, because that's my priority—teenagers and whatever I can do to assist teenagers in their development. Black professionals, regardless of their area of expertise, have an obligation to be of assistance to any young black teenager who is struggling. If they can't get the information at home, we should be the next resource. So whenever teenagers call me and say, 'I just need to talk to you about where I am,' I sit down and talk to them and I don't have to know them. All they have to do is say, 'Joe Blow told me to call you, that you'd talk to me.' "

Because of her work with teenagers, Peterson was asked to join the board of her local YMCA, and eight years ago became the first black and the first woman to sit on the board: "It was an experience. My reason for being on that board was to be an advocate for inner-city teenagers. That's why I consented to serve. Things I would bring up, the men would say I was emotional, you know, the whole thing. 'Oh, God, Ellie, your information is good, but you're too emotional,' and all that kind of crap, you know. And I would tell them, 'Maybe you need to become more emotional about it and then I wouldn't have to be.' "

She had been through this sort of thing before during her term on the city council in the mid-1970s: "I've gone through that whole thing about being emotional and all that because I'm a very vocal female. And I don't mind. It's gotten me this far in forty-seven years. You know, it has."

Peterson believes that most of the work of voluntary associations is done by women: "We have a tendency to hang in longer than the men. They don't have the stick-to-itiveness for the nitty-gritty stuff. If it doesn't happen right away for most men, they're gone—on to something else."

Still, Peterson doesn't expect her community work to go on forever. She has invested enough in volunteering over the past 20 years and is considering at least a semiretirement. "When I get to the point where I'm burned out with volunteerism, I'm gone. I don't plan to spend my golden years going to community meetings. When I turn fifty, good-bye community. My Lord, if I haven't had any influence in the changes in the Hartford community, I never will. So I won't hang in there till I'm sixty-five. I'm not saying I'll give up all of them. I might have one or two special interest groups. I'll always be involved politically. Because I love it. I really do."

KATHRYN PARSONS

Kathryn Parsons has a passion for political work: at 72, she has served as a state legislator, an administrator in various federal and state agencies, and a volunteer. She is "almost feverish" about the need for volunteers to participate in politics. "Getting people to do stuff," she says, is the only way to save the political

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process from media consultants and professional organizers. Parsons, who served 15 years in the Massachusetts legislature, has an old-fashioned faith in the possibilities of representative government. She ran her campaigns the old-fashioned way—talking to people in her district and ringing doorbells.

"To me a person who goes through this kind of process goes into the legislature, let us say, not as a prey to special interests. When you're elected, you're supposed to be a representative in some way or other, certainly if you're in the legislature," Parsons insists. "I just cannot imagine running for anything without getting a reasonably good committee of different kinds of people together to sit down and have all the dissent, and the fun of building something up, to come out of it with some sense of what the needs are, who really cares about it."

Parsons began her political career in the 1940s after the war, when she moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her husband and started working for the League of Women Voters. She became president of her local chapter, served on the statewide board, and in 1952, at 43, decided it was time to run for the state legislature. "With a great deal of hard work and little bit of luck, I made it." She served for two years, was defeated in her campaign for a second term—"with a fair amount of hard work and not as much luck"—and was reelected in 1957. She gave up her seat in the legislature in 1970, ran an unsuccessful campaign for statewide office, and then did "a couple of things," paid and unpaid. "Then the regional director of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare [HEW] was appointed to a new job, and I was invited to be regional director."

HEW was "fun," but her tenure there was brief, ending with the Ford Presidency. For the past two years Parsons has been a board member of several profit-making and voluntary, not-for-profit organizations. She also has continued doing "political stuff, working for candidates and so forth."

The fact that so much of her work now is unpaid is, for Parsons, only incidental. Her husband is also retired and involved in a number of volunteer activities, but they have all they need for themselves, and haven't any children: "Money doesn't really make much of a difference. It isn't that I've been rich, you

understand, but it's the feeling of doing something that you think is worth doing. If somebody asked, 'What are you doing now?' I wouldn't say, 'I'm a volunteer.' That's not a description of what you do, that's a description of how somebody else values what you do."

This commitment to "doing something that you wanted to do that needed to be done" wasn't a family tradition. "My mother taught, but she really wasn't much of a community worker; neither was my father," says Parsons. "I grew up in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, went to Swarthmore College, graduated in 1930 with honors in economics. At that point, not having enough money to go to law school, or anything else, I took a quick secretarial course. I got a job as a secretary and assistant to the comptroller at Swarthmore, where a few years later, my husband came to teach psychology. In 1940, my husband was asked if he'd take a year's leave and run a Friends' camp for conscientious objectors, which we did in California. Worked there for a year. Came back to Philadelphia, and I went into the Friends Service Committee and continued to work in the conscientious objector section for the duration plus six months.

"When the Friends Service Committee interviewed you to work there, you were asked how much money you needed in order to work there. I said that I could work for carfare and a couple of lunches. So I worked all through the war as a volunteer on that basis—side by side with people who were getting paid full-time. Other people who worked for the service committee full-time didn't get any salary at all. There was not a hierarchy of jobs that were for the staff and others for the volunteers. You did a job and you were a volunteer, and you got paid enough to make it possible for you to work there—or you got paid nothing."

Kathryn Parsons believes that once everyone is paid fairly and equally, money as an incentive "isn't as effective as people think it is." "You have to be thinking about other ways for people to get involved in their jobs," maintains Parsons. "Get them to do their jobs not because you tell them to, but because they have joined in whatever their organization is doing, and this is their hunk of it, and they essentially feel responsible for it and a commitment to it. That's what I think is essential in the public sector."

Parsons's own motivation to perform is based on a "social obligation" connected to her ideal of a "democratic form of government." For some people, the motivation is more personal, a need to do something for somebody else. "I think that money is a substitute," observes Parsons. "It's absolutely necessary, but essentially beyond the point where it's necessary, it becomes a substitute for things that you don't get if you don't have the feeling that what you're doing is an important part of something and that people you're working with recognize that. It isn't the money, it's the fact that what you're doing is worth something."

DENISE BAINES

Before she would consent to be interviewed, Denise Baines wanted to be sure I was a feminist, with a feminist perspective on volunteering. She would not want to help me glorify a tradition of service that "exploits" women and reinforces their economic powerlessness; volunteering stands for everything that is wrong with the status of women: "As women we serve our husbands, we serve our children, serve our community, and that clearly is part of the whole economic system, that puts us in the position of thinking that our time and energy should be for the service of everyone else for no remuneration. That's the part that angers me about volunteerism. It directly contradicts everything I believe in. It so much reflects what our culture does to women."

Baines, at 41, is now a divorced parent of three teenagers, a social worker, and an "activist." She has a paid job teaching in a New England school of social work, coordinating a special project on domestic violence, and she has worked for free for about 15 years "around issues" of family planning and reproductive rights. All her work, paid and unpaid, focuses on protecting women and securing their rights; almost all of it is devoted to "policy issues" and "systems change."

As a paid professional, Baines prefers administrative and policy work and believes that social service work "tends to be a sort of Band-Aiding approach that blames the victim; it's the sort of analysis that sometimes can say, 'This is your problem; let me help you.'" Baines will only volunteer "to be an activist to challenge the system," not to deliver individual services—except, perhaps, to other women.

"I've worked with a lot of battered women in my most recent job," Baines says. "Rape-crisis centers, battered women's shelters—they couldn't survive without volunteer work. A lot of services that are clearly identified as women's services are never fully supported at the level they should be. And I think that's where feminists come in and say, 'we have a commitment to other women.'"

Should a woman volunteer to help out at the nursing home down the block instead of a rape-crisis center? "If we get into providing that direct service, we undermine the ability to challenge—it's collusion in a certain sense. Where it comes to direct service, I say that's the responsibility of government."

Baines grew up without the Women's Movement, in the 1950s, with traditional expectations. She entered into a traditional marriage as soon as she graduated from college, and had three children by the time she was 28.

She became involved with Planned Parenthood in her mid-twenties, in her own childbearing years. She was living in Florida with her husband—he was in the service, and they'd "moved around a lot"—and she was looking for something that fitted in with her background in sociology and psychology. Planned Parenthood, "sort of fit, coming out of sociology, coming out of psychology, being a woman, being a mother... the population control issue at the time, in the sixties. It was an organization that I'd heard about that made sense."

Her work on reproductive rights intensified in the 1970s, after Baines moved north, divorced her husband, went back to school, and became a feminist. She helped organize a statewide chapter of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL) and she began working with the National Women's Political Caucus. This was a "liberal feminist" phase, which lasted through most of her thirties and left her somewhat disenchanted.

"I did lobbying for women's issues for about eight years," Baines says, "and after a while you sort of burn out. Obviously it's really important to do, but personally I'm much more cynical about it now, so I can't go back with the same kind of energy."

Now she is interested in working at the community level with coalitions of women, with minorities and the poor, and in the courts. She has moved away from NARAL and electoral politics and is working on reproductive issues with a grass-roots group of low-income women: "Right now it's very much a class issue since only poor women still have limitations and restrictions on access to abor-

tion. We've been working on a lawsuit to provide state funding for Medicaid abortions, and I really worked hard and was one of the main organizers. Because when you analyze the abortion issue, you know that we haven't won in state legislatures or in Congress, we've won through the courts. Another volunteer activity that I've been doing recently is working with community television. I've been putting a lot of energy into that as a way for people in the community to be able to control community awareness and education. It's been an interesting combination, because I still bring in my feminist views and issues into a broader community group to make sure that gets part of broader community programming."

It is clear that Baines has gone through a progression as a volunteer—from concerned homemaker to liberal feminist to a slightly disillusioned "grass-roots activist." I suggest to her, tentatively, that volunteering has helped shape her politically, that it has been as powerful and positive an influence on her evolution as the Women's Movement; volunteering for Planned Parenthood was the beginning of her professional career. It is hard for Baines to agree that there can be anything good about traditional volunteering: "If I had a different awareness and consciousness starting out as a young woman now, there's no way I would set up my life to be in that role, as strictly a professional volunteer." The fact that she may have grown in that role and advanced herself professionally doesn't save it: "Men never have to do that to move up in society."

Looking back, Baines feels that the simple desire to contribute is a "trap" for a woman; it means always playing a servile, nurturing role and always being dependent on men. "I believe that everyone should be working and everyone should be paid for that work, because I think we all need that common sense of economic equality to really have rights in the system. I think as long as there's a free labor force and it's based on gender, it's always going to feed into the oppression of women." Volunteering gives a woman freedom and flexibility in her work and makes it easier to be a mother—but at the prices of economic power and professional success.

Wendy Kaminer, a lawyer and a freelance writer, has written for the "Village Voice," the New York Times "Book Review," and for the anthology "Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography" (Bantam).