

Association for Volunteer Administration Harriet Naylor Distinguished Member Award Acceptance Speech

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Laura Lee Geraghty

At the 1992 Conference on Volunteer Administration, Laura Lee M. Geraghty was presented with the Harriet Naylor Distinguished Member Service Award. She has served AVA as the 1980 National Conference Chair, Public Policy Chair, President, Chair of the Past President's Council and as a frequent trainer and informal advisor. During her presidency, AVA's membership increased 53%, the budget deficit was eliminated, two record-breaking conferences were held, and AVA hired its first executive director.

Ms. Geraghty's business accomplishments have been far-reaching. First as a social worker and then as a Coordinator of Volunteer Services with the Welfare Department, she has advocated for professionalism in volunteerism. As Director of the Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services, she advocated and developed programs and services to strengthen voluntary efforts through research, lobbying, training, and lecturing. In her current position as Director of Community Services for WCCO Radio in Minneapolis, she has developed plans and partnership programs to respond to community needs. In addition, Ms. Geraghty is a long-time faculty member at Metropolitan State University, developing and teaching programs in Volunteer Administration, and is an active volunteer herself.

Thank you very much for this award. It is indeed a great honor to be counted among the recipients of the AVA Harriet Naylor Distinguished Member Award.

It is very special to be recognized by one's co-workers and colleagues; for it is you, those of you who have labored with me in the trenches of volunteerism over the last 20 years, who know not only my strengths, but also my weaknesses. Some of you may know them in painful detail. Despite that knowledge you have chosen me to follow in the footsteps of the leaders of our field.

I cannot help but feel a little guilty for receiving an award for doing something that I so love to do. Volunteerism has been both my vocation and my avocation.

As Director of the Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services, and in many of my volunteer roles, I have had an opportunity to work with creative and dynamic volunteer leadership from throughout the state and the country. This interaction on a daily basis has kept me energized and my spirit renewed. It is not difficult to work in this type of environment.

My commitment to the principles of citizen participation, and my belief that each of us has a responsibility to contribute to the communities in which we live and work, has motivated me in my career. But the workload and lifestyle have not always been easy. I have been fortunate to have many relationships which resulted in personal encourage-

ment and a support system that has helped me to be good at what I do.

- My parents fostered in me a sense of exploration and an understanding that I could be whatever I wanted to be.
- My wonderful husband and beautiful daughter have provided support and encouragement for me to take risks and, for the most part, tolerated long work hours and frequent absences.
- At MOVS, I worked with energetic, bright, creative staff who were always willing to stretch toward excellence and knew how to have fun doing so.
- I have worked for Governors and Commissioners who have provided me with new challenges and growth opportunities.
- Through the Department administration I was exposed to, and indoctrinated into, some of the best management concepts and practices available today.

I have also been very fortunate to have an incredibly rich professional support system.

The Association for Volunteer Administration has been consistently intertwined in my career as a volunteer leader.

I first became involved in the field of volunteerism when I was a young social worker, frustrated with a system which attempted to help people who were already hurting but did little to change the system in ways that prevented the hurt. As a result of this frustration I became heavily involved, as a volunteer, in grassroots, Alinsky-style community organizing. At this point I was already serving as a volunteer leader, but didn't know it. I did understand and passionately embraced the concept of enabling people to help themselves and their communities through citizen participation. That passion remains with me today.

Within a few years I was approached by Phyllis Acker, an active AVA member

and leader, who encouraged me to apply for the Volunteer Coordinator position she was leaving at the Ramsey County Welfare Department. It was obviously a good fit—an extension of my commitment to citizen involvement.

My first boss, Pearl Mitchell, was a dynamic leader and an early member and supporter of AVA, who encouraged my professional development.

I was then recruited as the first Director of the Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services by Miriam Karlins, the founder of AVA, and sometimes regarded as the font of all knowledge—at least concerning the field of volunteerism. Once I was in the position Miriam *insisted* that I join AVA and *made me* go to my first AVA conference in Clarksville, Indiana. This was the beginning of my long and close association with AVA.

As a result of my AVA membership my early mentors were joined by others in the field who provided me with mentoring and advice: Harriet Naylor, Carol Moore, Sara Jane Rehnborg, Ivan Scheier, Sue Vineyard. The list could go on and on. But this professional association has been a foundation from which I've learned, and grown, and received inspiration and support.

I can say the same for my relationships within the Minnesota Association of Volunteer Directors and other local associations of volunteer leaders. I have benefited from the experience and expertise of Connie Skillingstad, Paula Beugan, Mike Newman, Jackie Sinykin, Maggie Davern, Bev Robinson, Connie Schilling and a host of others.

All of these connections have been factors in my ability to serve effectively as a volunteer leader. So when you look at this award, I hope you see a mirror reflecting back the special gifts you have given me.

Some of you know that after serving as the Director of the Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services for 17 years, I recently moved to a new position with

WCCO Radio as Director of Community Services. The responses that I have received to that move have been both heartwarming and humorous.

I received calls expressing disappointment at my "leaving the field of volunteerism." For those of you who feel, or believe, that I have "left the field," I suggest to you that I have not and will not—for the field of volunteerism is part of who and what I am.

I see my new position as a wonderful opportunity to take the knowledge, skills, contacts and great love of citizen participation and bring them into a new arena to continue supporting volunteerism and involvement mechanisms from a different vantage point.

Among the cards and letters expressing wishes for success in my new position was one which simply said, "Laura Lee, The point is that some people build wherever they are." Signed Ivan Scheier. And I am simply building in a different location.

The field of volunteerism has changed incredibly in my 20 plus years of involvement. Yet I believe we are on the precipice of a whole new set of challenges. The growing understanding of how essential the component of voluntary action is in meeting community needs is going to propel us to a new level of challenges.

I would like to talk about four qualities that I believe will be needed for volunteer leaders to deal with these future challenges. These are: competence, conviction, courage and compassion.

I have seen phenomenal changes in the level of competence of paid and unpaid volunteer leaders over the last two decades. We unquestionably are far better at providing volunteer leadership today than we have been in the past. Much of this quality has resulted from the development of support systems such as local, state and national level professional associations and resource organizations like the Minnesota Office

on Volunteer Services and the Points of Light Foundation. It has occurred as we share our knowledge and skills with each other, formally and informally, and as we work collectively to make changes that are needed in the field. We've developed books and courses and journals and all kinds of new resources that have helped us to develop our competence in the core skills required in volunteer administration. But the job here is not done nor will it probably ever be done. We will always be striving to increase our own competency and the quality of our programs.

In particular, we will need to develop partnerships with individuals from other fields, such as law, insurance, marketing—partnerships which will give us access to skills and talents needed in our programs and needed to address barriers to volunteerism. We must reach out to other disciplines to expand on those skills.

The second quality needed is conviction. We must all believe that what we are doing in the field of volunteerism really has the potential, and is in fact working, to make this world a better place in which to live. We must believe that we have the power and the ability to help people reach their full potential through volunteer action. When we are doing our best, volunteer administration is not a comfortable job. At our very best we are enablers and risk-takers. We must have a sense of conviction about our ability to enable change and we must be able to serve as advocates for this cause.

And it makes sense that our convictions must be followed by courage. It will take courage in order to implement some of the things that we believe in. We will be called upon more and more in the future to be advocates to insure that the common man is actively involved, not only in service delivery, but also in helping to resolve some of the most pressing problems in our communities and in our world. That will not always be easy. It

will frequently require a great deal of strength and energy and courage.

A fourth quality that we need to maintain is compassion. Now you may find that a somewhat unusual topic for me to raise in this group. For compassion is what led most of us to this field to begin with—compassion for the health and well-being of other people or for our environment. We have, as a field, been very compassionate in our work with the broader community and with our attempts to promote the causes for which we work. We have not, however, always been as compassionate as we could be with one another.

If we are to be strong advocates for volunteerism, for the empowerment of individuals—if we are to be risk takers—then, in fact, we will need to have a support system which nurtures us and gives us the energy and the strength to be on that “cutting edge.” We need to get that support primarily from one another. Again, I am talking about the importance of support systems. I can certainly speak from the voice of experience on this issue. Some of the toughest times I’ve ever faced, both professionally and personally, I have faced with many of you in this room. You have been my support, you have been my extended family, you have given me the strength and energy to take risks.

But sometimes we get too busy to see the need or to hear the plea for help, or to recognize a silent plea. Sometimes conflicting interests or values lead us to close out others. We need to be very sensitive and responsive to the needs of one another. That includes being honest and direct when we have conflicts with one another and always being respectful despite differences.

Tomorrow morning we will all have a wonderful opportunity to hear Jennifer James speak. Jennifer doesn’t know me. I don’t believe we have ever met, but she has been close to me for a long time. I first heard Jennifer speak at a conference several years ago and her message has had a great impact on me. A strong theme in her message is that “Success is the quality of the journey—and not a destination.” In fact, that’s also the title of one of her books.

Everything I have done in this field I have done in partnership with others. I cannot think of a single accomplishment that I have attained alone. The field of volunteerism has provided me with a wonderful journey—rich in challenges, friendships, achievements and a few disappointments. I thank you for being part of my journey.