

# Age Has No Limits

## *How to Attract and Keep Volunteers throughout the Life Cycle*

By Nora Silver

People always have something to give. What we have to offer and how we choose to give it, however, shifts over time. Just as abilities, interests and challenges ebb and flow, the gifts we have to share vary as we pass through different life stages.

The field of adult development offers information that can help organizations recruit, involve and appreciate volunteers. What if we design jobs and support volunteers in ways that recognize their current developmental tasks? How much more effective might they be if we respond to volunteers holistically in ways that enhance their ability to contribute?

**Adolescence.** Facing the task of exploring their identity and enjoying a moratorium before the full burden of adulthood, adolescents seek opportunities to "try on" different identities. They appreciate variety and adventure. They like working with others because it increases their chances to experiment and get feedback and because it is enjoyable. So, how to recruit? Offer a smorgasbord of opportunities, a menu of short term "samplers." Involve other young people as recruiters and offer group opportunities. Support young volunteers by offering them chances to de-brief. Appreciate them frequently and visibly. Thank them

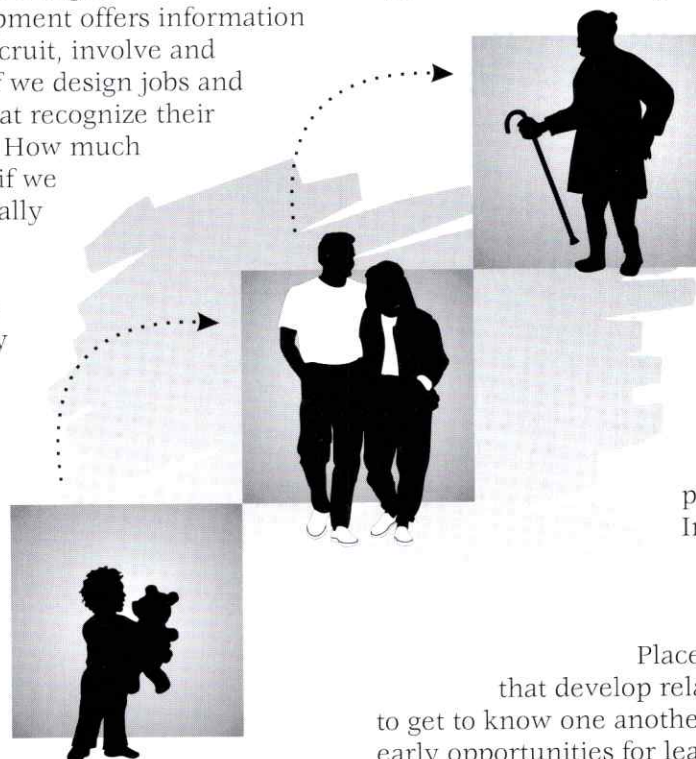
with small tokens (passes to food and entertainment establishments), opportunities for training and informal social events. Don't overlook chances for job- or resume-building such as internships, job-shadowing opportunities and recognition and reference letters.

### **Early Adulthood.**

Young adults face two major challenges: establishing intimacy and gaining competence. Early adulthood is a time of learning the rules of the adult world and experimenting with its roles. It is a time marked by action more than introspection. Volunteer recruitment that promises opportunities to meet others and try new skills might be particularly attractive. The Internet and radio are good outreach tools. Involve young adults in focused tasks that develop mastery.

Place them in small work groups that develop relationships and opportunities to get to know one another. Provide mentors. Offer early opportunities for leadership. Applaud individual successes. Be bold in recognition and generous with praise—young adults need encouragement especially in their early undertakings.

**Early Adulthood Transition.** This turbulent period is characterized by a questioning of one's values, commitments and choices, and by upheaval from established relationships and career paths. This is a time during which people begin to recognize and integrate aspects of themselves that were hidden. They are willing to consider what they want out of this life, having concentrated earlier on what they ought to do. They often spend time tearing up the structures of the



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they couldn't use them. When God's Love We Deliver and Momentum began to serve meals to a more varied and geographically dispersed group of clients, they recruited volunteers by forming partnerships with local organizations which provide space and volunteers who might be attracted by the chance to help their neighbors.

With the rise in the number of cases, AIDS volunteers came to represent a broad cross-section of people. While gay men continue to represent the backbone of many organizations, lesbians and heterosexual women have come to be a more and more important

source of assistance. Agencies in varied parts of the country are also attracting more volunteers from large corporations as well as college students and older people. Many AIDS volunteers also are clients. With improved health, people living with AIDS are able to volunteer on a regular basis and sometimes move into paid staff jobs. Carol Vogt of the Chicken Soup Brigade points out that people living with HIV "are the best volunteers because they take it seriously. It really matters to them. They show up on time. They treat it like a job." The role of clients is especially critical in agencies serving communities of color. Socrates Caba, the Volunteer Director at Bronx AIDS Services in New York, points out that clients derive two important benefits from their work: they are able to "give back" to the community and they can attend the agency's staff training programs. Their involvement places them in a setting where they have access to new and changing information and helps them to be informed health care consumers. Hopefully, the information they obtain can help them to enhance the quality and even the length of their lives.

Housing Works in New York City has a strong commitment to client participation. Clients serve on the agency's board, attend job interviews of prospective employees, and work in all of its departments. This high level of participation strengthens the agency's links to the community it serves. All of its clients have been homeless and many have histories of substance abuse and mental illness. Volunteer director Brigid Lang points out that clients' involvement provides the



*Chicken Soup Brigade driver Tommy Martin and client.*

agency with a "way to connect to the community" and gives clients the opportunity to be in a structured work situation. In this way, volunteering serves as an important prelude to entering the agency's job training program which has produced nearly one-fifth of the agency's current staff. Lang also speculates that with relatively better health, clients might broaden their interests in the future and be less concentrated in HIV organizations than they are today.

Even though the sense of urgency about the epidemic has decreased and many people with HIV are healthier, the epidemic is far from over. Lisa Carlson, of God's Love We Deliver points out that "Volunteers see they are needed." Carol Vogt notes, "The food is more important than ever." As the epidemic continues and changes course, volunteers remain an important source of labor and support for organizations throughout the country. At the same time, staff in a broad array of positions need to recognize that the roles they play will continue to change until a cure is found. Many patients are not benefiting from protease inhibitors because of their high cost, the complicated treatment regimen they require, or because they are physically unable to tolerate them.

As the early optimistic reports are followed by more sobering information on the long-term impact of these treatments, volunteers will continue to be needed to fight AIDS but in different ways than in the past. At the same time, they still will be needed to pack grocery bags, serve and deliver meals, provide support, educate the living and comfort the dying. ■

lives they so busily built during earlier adulthood, in order to admit more freedom.

Volunteer opportunities that allow for experimentation might be particularly appealing—a chance to test another career interest or an avenue to express other interests. Volunteering itself might be advertised as time for oneself, outside the obligations of family and work. Working for a good cause can provide an outlet for frustrated hopes and dreams. Advertising in men's and women's magazines may be fruitful. Consider recognition that is personal, acknowledging the particular contribution of the individual.

#### **Settling Down, Rooting and Extending.**

Following the earlier upheaval, this is the stage in which people begin to settle down in the fullest sense—putting down roots and sending out new shoots. It is a time of converting dreams into concrete goals. People begin to speak more with their own voice. They become less dependent on other individuals and institutions—sometimes outgrowing their mentors—and they begin to assume more responsibility for themselves and others.

There is some evidence that for women this is a time to focus on combining identity and accomplishment with an earlier mastery of intimacy, whereas for men, this is a time to capture intimacy in addition to identity and achievement. Volunteers in this life stage may be more easily reached through their work and community affiliations (religious, neighborhood, professional). They may welcome opportunities that

meld their work and home lives. They may also welcome volunteer tasks that permit them to delve into their communities and assume significant leadership roles. Public recognition that highlights achievement is appropriate—in the local newspaper, for instance.

**Mid-Life Transition.** The midlife transition is the threshold to the “second half of life.” A time when people come face to face with their “dark side” and inner demons, this period is characterized by rageful introspection. For the first time, they come face to face with mortality. They feel the vulnerability of their bodies and the limitations of their achievements.

This is a difficult stage for many adults, during which an outlet of significant volunteer involvement might be particularly meaningful. Volunteer opportunities that can capture some of this energy and reflection will be most rewarding. Opportunities that provide for personal meaning and recognition will be highly valued. A fulfilling volunteer involvement at this time just might set the stage for continued volunteering through middle and older adulthood.

**Middle Age.** Middle age provides a time to modify one's life structure before entering older adulthood. It is a time of reorganization and renaissance. A major issue is caring for and guiding the next generation. People are interested in passing on the lessons they've learned and the wisdom they've gained. Mentoring and caring for the world are of particular appeal. This is a period of assuming social and civic responsibility.

Middle-agers recognize that although youth has

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power, middle age has influence. They can be called on to use their influence on behalf of our causes and institutions. They may be recruited through their interest in mentoring others. This is a period marked by self approval and peace of mind. People in middle age may need less approbation from their volunteer work, but may very much want to know that it is making a difference for others.

**Older Adulthood.** Those entering older adulthood are faced with a psychosocial task called ego integrity—looking back with dignity on one's particular life experiences and affirming the patterns and meanings that constitute one's life choices. People entering the "young" old period often are faced with retirement challenges: the end to a scheduled life, reduced income, loss of social relationships, potential loss of meaning associated with productivity and contribution, isolation from the mainstream and loss of markers such as time, structure, recognition, feedback, status, power and identity.

Volunteer opportunities that meet the needs of these adults abound, particularly opportunities that stabilize the adjustment to unmarked time and meet the needs for interaction, feedback and status.

Recognition that involves social interaction and includes visible appreciation by the organization should be considered.

For the "old" old (roughly age 75 and up), poor health becomes an issue, as does poor housing, vulnerability to crime and limited income. We may need to provide transportation, meals while working or work that can be done at home or at a senior center.

## *Middle-agers recognize that although youth has power, middle age has influence.*

Older adults value learning new skills, such as operating a computer, and the chance to stay productive and engaged. They like to be given tasks and to be allowed to complete them. Recognition that can be shown to others—plaques, certificates, thank-you letters—is appreciated. Opportunities to socialize on the job and during training and recognition events may be especially valued.

With this information about adult developmental life challenges and issues, we can be more thoughtful and effective in meeting the needs of our volunteers. But first, a caution. Although there may be a sequence to life issues, there is always variation as to when and how individuals meet these stages. The reason for this is that we operate not only from a chronological age (the number of years since birth), but from a composite age that takes into account other factors such as our physical age and the year of our birth. (A person born in 1920 who came of age during the depression did not experience adolescence in the same way as someone born in 1970 who entered their teens during the financial excesses of the 1980s.)

How we face a life issue is heavily influenced by our gender, our race and our culture. Notions of affiliation and achievement still are defined differently for women and men. Acceptable levels of individuation and group cohesiveness vary tremendously depending upon our racial and cultural backgrounds.

Anticipating the life issues that our volunteers might face helps us ask the right questions such as, "Would you prefer to work alone or in a group?" or "Are you seeking a leadership role in your volunteer work?" or "Do you prefer private recognition to public thank-you's?" This approach should also help us listen more holistically to what people want to gain from their work with us. In turn, our organizations and our communities will benefit from the rainbow of gifts our volunteers have to offer at all stages of their lives. ■

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