



THE JOYS OF VOLUNTEERING
by Soroptimist Executive Director Leigh Wintz, CAE
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I adore the writings of Erma Bombeck. She is witty and funny and always seems to cheer me up. She is one woman whose writing I really miss. But the things she wrote about are classic as well as funny. Given my love of humor, it is a little odd that my favorite piece by Ms. Bombeck is a rather serious piece. It first appeared in 1975 so it's old enough to be new again! The sentiments expressed capture how we turn to each other support in tough economic times. It's entitled, "So Long, Volunteers".

I had a dream the other night that every volunteer in this land had set sail for another country. I stood smiling on the pier, shouting, "Good-by phone committees. Good-by disease-of-the-month. No more getting out the vote. No more playground duty, bake sales and three-hour meetings."

As the boat got smaller, I reflected: "Serves them right, that bunch of yes people. All they had to do was to put their tongues firmly against the roofs of their mouths and make an "o" sound - no. It would certainly have spared them a lot of grief. Oh well, who needs them?"

The hospital was quiet as I passed it. The reception desk was vacant. Rooms were devoid of books, flowers and voices. The children's wing held no clowns, no laughter.

The home for the aged was like a tomb. The blind listened for a voice that never came. The infirm were imprisoned on wheelchairs that never moved. Food grew cold on trays that would never reach the hungry.

The social agencies had all closed their doors - unable to implement their programs of scouting, recreation, drug control; unable to help the retarded, crippled, lonely and abandoned. Health agencies had signs in their windows: "Cures for cancer, birth defects, multiple sclerosis, heart diseases, etc. have been cancelled because of lack of interest."

The schools were strangely quiet, with no field trips and no volunteer classroom aides. Symphony Hall and the museums that had been built and

stocked by volunteers were dark and would remain that way.

The flowers on church altars withered and died. Children in day nurseries lifted their arms, but there was no one to hold them in love. Alcoholics cried out in despair, but no one answered. The poor had no recourse for health care or legal aid.

I fought in my sleep to regain a glimpse of the ship of volunteers just one more time. It was to be my last glimpse of a decent civilization.

Erma offers us a grim view of life in our communities without volunteers. But as a Soroptimist, you know full well how meaningful your contributions are to the lives of the women and girls that we touch. Many of us have experienced first hand the joy in a child's eyes as she plays with the toys you provided for Christmas; the hope in the eyes of a woman who has reclaimed her dream of a better life because your club gave her a Woman's Opportunity Award. You have experienced the satisfaction of knowing that you have made a difference in someone's life. But if all of this is so patently obvious, why does it seem that volunteers are so much harder to come by? Why is recruitment and retention of members more difficult than ever before?

For women, career and educational opportunities have opened up as never before. In the U.S., 67% of women are now employed in the work force either full or part-time. Add to that, a percentage of women also attending school to further their education, or gain a new skill and its no wonder that so many women are feeling pressures over a lack of time - feeling overextended, over committed.

Rhoda Dorsey, President of Goucher College in Baltimore, wrote the following:

Her credentials were in order: bachelors and masters degrees from good institutions, relevant on-the-job experience, good references from previous employers. She was dressed for success in a sedate but stylish manner. But I'm not going to hire the young woman whom I interviewed this morning for a key administrative position.

My reason is a simple one. She belongs to no professional or civic associations; she has no record of contributing her time to her college, to her profession, to her neighborhood, or to her favorite charity. She's one-dimensional, lacking in the outside interests that make her an asset to her employer and to the community in which she lives and works - and that will, over the long term, help her to advance personally and professionally.

I asked the young woman in the interview this morning why she had not become involved in any outside activities. "I just don't have time - my current job is too demanding," she explained. There was a hint of impatience in her tone - as though civic responsibility and corporate womanhood were mutually exclusive.

In the early days of the women's movement, volunteerism got a bad name. Volunteer work was just one more example of women squandering their time and talents instead of pursuing real work in corporations and government where men ruled. As we attempted to scale new ladders of success, women took hold of the male formula for success and thought that their network of women friends and colleagues could not possibly be as valuable as the networks that the men had established. We really didn't even know what a network was or how to build and maintain one - just that we needed to have one! These days network has become synonymous with social media – Facebook, Linked-In. But sharing what you are doing on Twitter or posting photos taken at last Saturday night's party is not the kind of network I'm talking about. Look at the network of women for a variety of occupations and interests that sitting with you right here in this room. Now multiply that by the thousands of Soroptimist members around the world and you will realize the power of our volunteer network for personal growth, professional development and community improvement.

More and more corporations are aware of the added value that employees - men and women - who volunteer bring to their jobs and for a good reason. They know that volunteer work can break up the routine of daily life and perk up interest and enthusiasm on and off the job. The fact is that a person without outside interests is a very flat individual indeed. He or she is not the kind of person I'm interested in spending much time with in or out of the office.

Young people who aspire to the corporate boards of tomorrow need to start establishing their track records today. Volunteer work can provide visibility, experience, and confidence. But more important, it can offer a very special brand of fulfillment not found at work or home. If we are to find and keep today's volunteer, we must let her know what volunteerism can do for her and then structure our organizations to provide opportunities for service and fellowship that will attract and keep them.

Here is a list of 14 ways that your volunteer work can help you. Remember them to assure yourself that you are experiencing all the joys of volunteering and be able to articulate them to others in order to attract new volunteers into your chapter.

1. Volunteer work can help you develop and practice new skills, and gain new knowledge by being exposed to new vistas.
2. Volunteer work can help you keep present work skills current while taking a break to improve education or raise children.
3. While volunteering, you can practice and improve underdeveloped skills. No one can fire you if you don't do it absolutely right and no one can demote you if you have to ask for help.

4. Volunteer work can help you assess and test interests and abilities. Would I really like working with disabled children, teenaged girls, impoverished women?
5. It can help you discover a new interest area or become more knowledgeable about one already identified.
6. Explore and test a potential career field through your volunteer work.
7. It can help you link with a clearly defined career goal.
8. Volunteer work can help you discover other available career areas.
9. Through volunteer work you can build a network of community, business and social contacts.
10. Use volunteer work to enhance self-esteem and build self-confidence. You can practice public speaking, keeping books, writing reports, letters.
11. Participate in important decisions.
12. Improve problem-solving capabilities. This is the backbone of club work - see a need and fill it.
13. Volunteer work allows you to increase qualifications for a civic or political role.
14. Provide leadership opportunities. You know what leadership is don't you? It's the art of leading people astray with confidence.

To keep volunteers committed, it is important that everyone see that all members feel appreciated and can see that their presence and participation does make a difference. Recognize opportunities for personal growth and advancement. Members should feel capable of handling tasks offered and know that their efforts will be recognized publicly. All members should feel a part of the club's decision making process and enjoy a sense of belonging and team spirit.

But I have focused mainly on the individual joys of volunteering. There is much to be said about the power and vitality of volunteering in a club setting where the unified effort of many magnifies by many times the power of one. When I count to three, each of you say your own name:

1 2 3

This time when I count to three, say SOROPTIMIST.

See how much stronger and louder and forceful - we had the same number of people, but

we united to work on one common goal. That's what international organization is all about, working together to improve the lives of women and girls in local communities and around the world.

Like anything else, we can only get out of volunteerism what we put into it. I suggest that we encourage our members and prospective members to look realistically at what they are able to do as a volunteer so that they can get the most out of it - so that volunteer time – precious leisure time - will truly enrich our own lives as well as those we serve.

In our humanitarian pursuits, we have three encompassing possessions: our time, our talent, and our treasure. Our time, of course, we cannot keep. Only that which we give to others is not lost. We also cannot keep our talent. We must use it or we lose it. Our treasure, at last, is not permanent either. Most of us have lived long enough to know that we really keep only that which we give away.

But to maintain your joy in volunteering, there are certain rules you should follow. You may not be aware that our federation president, Alice Wells, recently returned from an international seminar held atop a large mountain. Following a conversation with a burning bush, she returned and has instructed me as Executive Director to issue the following Ten Commandments for Soroptimist club members:

The Lord spake unto the leaders and gave them commandments that shall be set up to govern clubs:

1. Thou shalt not sign up for everything that passeth through thine hands. Thou shalt be selective with thine volunteer time lest thou becometh disenchanted.
2. Thou shalt NEVER sign up and not show up lest thy chairman heap iniquity upon the member and the member's children and the children's children to the third and fourth generations.
3. Thou shalt not vote yes on anything that thou hast no intention of supporting.
4. Honor thy chapter's leadership, for even if thou doest not agree with them, they still deserve thy respect.
5. Thou shalt not bear false witness against another member, for thou usually comest out the loser.
6. Thou shalt not present another's ideas as thine own. If thou bringest ideas to club which are new, thou shalt give credit to others where credit is due.
7. Thou shalt not covet another member's man servant, nor her maid servant, nor her gardener, nor her Lexus, nor her figure, nor her husband, nor anything that is another member's.

8. Thou shalt not indulge thyself in idle gossip for thou may find thyself the topic of conversation.
9. Thou shalt not make thine telephone into a graven image. If thou hast a gripe, thou shalt air it at thine club meeting.
10. Thou shalt remember thy club meeting day and keep it as an appointment.

In case you are wondering if there is a reward for following all of these commandments faithfully, I'd like to share with you this little poem:

Many will be shocked to find,
When the day of judgment nears,
That there's a place in Heaven
Set aside for volunteers.
Furnished with big recliners,
Satin couches and footstools;
Where there's no committee chairmen,
No group leaders or car pools.
No eager team that needs a coach,
No bazaar and no bake sale;
There will be nothing to staple,
Not one thing to fold or mail.
Telephone lists will be outlawed,
but a finger-snap will bring
Cold drinks and gourmet dinners,
And rare treats fit for a king.
You ask, who will serve these privileged few
and work for all they're worth?
Why, all those who reaped the benefits,
And NOT ONCE volunteered on Earth.

As your executive director, I would like to thank each and every one of you for the countless hours and many tasks for which you volunteer through Soroptimist. May you continue to know the joys of volunteering and be inspired to share the spirit of volunteerism with others.