

NEEDED: A "WE DECADE"

Remarks by Vin Hoey

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INTRODUCTION

There is an old Texas saying: "When you see a turtle on a fence post, you know he didn't get there by himself." The participation of Darien volunteers in the Voluntary Action Center's Board of Directors, Advisory Council and various programs has been a major factor in the VAC's progress over the last few years. We very much appreciate this leadership, as well as the important financial support of the Darien United Way.

Those recognized here today have impressive volunteer records. They have demonstrated such a commitment to volunteer activities, that I am reminded of a pig and a chicken who were walking down the street together. "Isn't that a terrible sign," said the pig, "Ham and Eggs 99¢." "I see nothing wrong with the sign," said the chicken, "Ham and Eggs 99¢." "Well, it may only be a contribution from you," said the pig, "but it means total commitment from me."

It's quite evident that those we have honored today have gone beyond volunteering time when it is convenient. These are otherwise busy people who still commit a part of themselves to community efforts. These effective volunteers have already been rewarded -- rewarded by a chance to use their skills and to pursue interests, and by what has been learned from people they have worked with and served. Still, volunteers are under appreciated; we don't thank them often enough. News media tend to concentrate on the sensational and not enough on these kinds of quiet, daily volunteer activities. So, it's very appropriate for us, at least once a year, to salute such volunteers and many others they represent.

As community agency staff members and volunteers, I don't need to tell you what you do is important -- you know that. You know how critical these services are. Instead, I plan to briefly review the past roles which volunteers have played in our country, and then focus on challenges in the decade ahead. I understand that your group runs on something akin to Rotary rules. That is, I can speak as long as I want, but the crowd leaves by 1:30 p.m. My presentation will be finished well before then to leave time for questions if you have any.

Historical Role of Volunteers

In the early days of our country, community projects were routinely carried out privately. People didn't happen to call it volunteering, but neighbors gathered to help build houses, barns and various community facilities. Local private initiative in volunteer time, as well as in financing, developed many of our colleges, hospitals and other institutions.

In the last half century, however, government funding and guidance have increasingly assumed a leadership role in providing educational, social and cultural services. The result has been a major expansion in the availability of services: higher education, health, a multitude of other social services, even the arts. Unfortunately, this substantially heavier government role has also, in my view, tended to reduce private local initiative, limit community involvement and overly centralize decision-making in Washington.

In the early 1970's, social observer Tom Wolfe coined a phrase, the "me decade", to characterize a turning inward by Americans which he sensed. While it's a generalization, the phrase is perhaps uncomfortably accurate as one characterization of our culture. The '70s were a decade during which

Looking Out for # 1 became a very popular best-seller; writers referred to ours as a spectator society; "let George do it", or too often "let Uncle Sam do it", became catch phrases.

Recently, we have been through what I see as a watershed national election. President Reagan was elected on a campaign platform emphasizing that the nation has been living beyond its means, producing rapid inflation and too high unemployment, with the potential for even more grave economic consequences in the future. The federal government budget now under discussion may well pass its key congressional hurdle this afternoon. The proposed economic remedies are strong medicine and have very substantial implications for non-profit organizations and for volunteers.

Looking more broadly at our society, we are seeing trends toward increased recognition of the limits of our national resources, public resistance to excessive government controls and proposals beyond the federal budget cuts to return responsibility for many social programs to states and local communities. These trends offer both challenges and opportunities for the voluntary sector. The question is: How will we respond?

To oversimplify a bit, the challenges and opportunities ahead are so massive that we need to move from a "me decade" toward a "we decade". As strategies for the '80s, I would like to suggest five major steps for your consideration to help us move toward a "we decade".

Major Voluntary Sector Strategies for the 1980s

One strategy is to promote public dialogue. What are the nature and magnitude of the challenges before us? What are appropriate roles for the voluntary, or independent, sector? How can we work with other sectors of society -- both the profit making institutions and national and local governments. At the agency level: what role should your agency be playing in 5-10 years? We need more discussion at the national and local levels on voluntary sector goals and strategies for the future. I am suggesting such a search for answers because, as you can tell from this presentation, I don't have very many of them.

A second major step for a "we decade" is a need to dramatically increase volunteer recruitment. In 1974 a U.S. Census Bureau-sponsored survey estimated that about 37 million citizens were involved in some kind of structured volunteer activity. Based on VAC data on local participation and discussions I had recently with the national VOLUNTEER organization based in Washington, D.C., it seems clear that volunteering is up from what it was a few years ago.

Yet there is potential for much greater volunteer participation. In a 1979 Gallup poll, about 60% of adults surveyed in non-rural areas indicated that they would volunteer, if they were asked. The question, then, is: How do we approach them? Here are just a few recruiting suggestions, based on shifts in attitude and life style which the local VAC is seeing.

In general, we are finding that people are growing more conscious of how they spend their time and are more carefully assessing what their volunteer

responsibilities will be. An agency may have developed a volunteer position and traditionally filled it with one person for several years. Today, we often see a need to involve several volunteers over a period of years. This suggests the need for a higher priority on recruitment. We also see the need for a new emphasis on recruiting senior citizens, a growing and important part of our society, and a new emphasis on recruiting young people.

Many community agencies are concerned about a loss of volunteers, especially women, who are leaving to seek paid employment. It would be well to see volunteering as a valid step toward employment, but then not view employment as a dead end for volunteers. As volunteers move into the work force, there is no need to expect they will drop all of their volunteer participation -- volunteering in the community can effectively complement a career in a paid position. Businesses, unions and many other groups offer great potential sources of additional volunteers, as organizations with internal communication networks, some common interests and a concern for their communities. We need to develop new approaches to seek the cooperation of these organizations in publicizing volunteer opportunities for their members.

As a third major step to meet the challenges ahead, we ought to look outside our local neighborhoods to other individuals and to opportunities to cooperate with other groups. No matter how well designed or how well intended the proposed cutback in the growth of government funding, changes on such a broad scale will have a disproportionate impact on various individuals and programs. While a worthy objective, it just isn't humanly possible to make

such changes equitable for all. So, we need to look for ways to address those with the most pressing needs.

At the individual level, as Robert O. Anderson, Chairman of the Atlantic Richfield Company, said in saluting employee volunteers, "In this day, ...we need quiet heroes who ... take time to shape a slightly different world from the one they found. We need suburbanites whose concerns do not stop at the city limits, who recognize that poverty in the inner city diminishes the quality of their own lives. We need parents who will extend their concern for their children to the children of other parents who can not struggle effectively against economic, physical or environmental handicaps."

At the agency level, we need to look beyond our own towns to common interests and concerns with groups in broader areas of our county and region. The old saying, "Mighty oaks from tiny acorns grow", is well known; and we marvel at the tiny acorn's capability. But the saying is not really valid when you think about it, because the tiny acorn doesn't do it all by itself. It also takes rain, sun, soil and wind in the right proportions to build mighty oaks. In a similar way, if we are to take on challenges of the scale of those before us, we will need to develop broader coalitions with other groups, identifying areas of consensus and common goals to work toward.

A fourth major strategy is a need to reappraise priorities. In a recent speech as Chairman of the national United Way of America, Exxon Corporation Chairman, Cliff Garvin said, "...only two things are certain for all of us. The first is that we in the volunteer sector can do more. The second is -- we cannot do everything. That is, we cannot do all that the Government itself

has tried -- and failed to do. We have the opportunity to apply greater managerial discipline and efficiency to the process of evaluating local needs, setting local priorities and allocating local funds." Mr. Garvin also emphasized the need for broad participation in the priority setting process.

When we look back over the last five decades, part of the rationale for an increasing government role was an assessment that services provided by many private efforts were too narrowly focused in terms of race, religion, country of origin or income of those being served. To the extent this has been a valid criticism, it seems to me that we dare not make that mistake again. We need to be inclusive rather than exclusive in our approaches.

As a fifth and final step, while we Americans are an impatient people, we are going to need to remind ourselves during the '80s of the need for patience and persistence. In his book No Easy Victories, John Gardner describes a discussion he had in the late '60s with a young college student who had spent three months working in a ghetto. "He was discouraged," said Gardner, "because he couldn't see signs of change, despite the fact that his dedication had burned like a gemlike flame for a whole summer. I think I persuaded him that another summer or two might be necessary."

If we are to meet the challenges before us, it is going to take more than this summer. It's going to take more than two or three summers; it's going to take at least a decade.

Conclusion

If we gather together here in nine or ten years and look back at the 1980s, how will we characterize this decade? Will we see it as another "me

decade" or will we see it as a "we decade"? Frankly, I'm optimistic that we can promote public dialogue on the challenges ahead and substantially increase volunteer recruitment; that we can promote the sort of caring and sharing attitudes which encourage volunteering; that we can meaningfully reappraise our priorities; and that we can be inclusive in our approaches. If we do this, it will help improve the quality of life of many Americans; it will encourage a significant decentralization in decision-making on local problems; and the volunteers involved in this effort will, I am sure, find it very, very rewarding.