

# Arlene Schindler

**HELPING TO HARNESS THE POWER OF VOLUNTEERISM**

By Barbara K. Wentworth, MS  
Photography by Tim Fuller

**Mentor, teacher, trainer, pioneer, traveler, advocate—these are just a few of the words used to describe Dr. Arlene K. Schindler. Her professional life journey has taken her from the inner city of Detroit, Michigan, to 137 countries around the world. And in many places, over a career spanning 50 years, she has touched lives and supported others in their quest to harness the power of volunteerism in their communities. >>**

**I**n talking with Arlene Schindler, it is easy to catch her enthusiasm about learning. In the early days of her professional career, with two undergraduate degrees and a Ph.D. in psychology of learning, she worked in the inner-city schools of Detroit as a teacher and administrator. There she honed a style that focused on understanding how young people learn and the effects of their culture—home, community, and school—on them. This work led her to travel extensively and to study literacy.

In 1968, she was asked by the Peace Corps to travel to Africa to set up a fledgling teacher-training program. “This was an eye opener for me,” Schindler notes, and her time there changed her life. When she returned to the United States, she was unemployed and looking for the next challenge that would utilize her love of learning and teaching. Settling in the Washington D.C. area, she was beckoned by a position for a training director at what was then the National Center for Voluntary Action (NCVA). Her recent work in Africa and this opportunity at NCVA came together. “I saw a door and went through it,” she says.

Along with delivering training on volunteer management for NCVA came the opportunity to start volunteer bureaus or volunteer centers across the United States. One of the major roles of the bureaus was to assist people interested in connecting to a local volunteer opportunity. While the sense of the times was that this was something to encourage, some of Schindler’s colleagues lamented the “evils” of volunteering in that it took families away from spending time with each other.

Out of those early conversations with colleagues around the United States came the novel idea of developing family volunteer programs—opportunities where families could volunteer together. With a grant from the Kellogg Foundation and inspiration from those colleagues, through NCVA, Schindler started the first program in a Montana nursing home. Today, family volunteering initiatives are commonplace.

Professional positions at other national organizations followed her time at the National Center for Voluntary Action—Women in Community Service, Prison Fellowship, and Special Olympics. Her work took her across the country and around the world. While each organization worked with a different population, the common thread was a focus on volunteering.

By the time the Soviet Union was breaking apart in the early 1990s, Schindler had connected with George Soros and his Open Society Institute (OSI). Founded in 1993, OSI was created to support foundations set up in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. As early as 1984, these Soros-backed foundations were established to help former communist countries in their transition to democracy. “Open Society really got me started in the international thing,” Schindler

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recalled. The word was out—if any community wanted to start a volunteer center, OSI was interested in supporting these initiatives.

In total, 15 cities, all in the former Soviet Union, were identified for volunteer center development. Schindler spent the next five years traveling across the new Commonwealth of Independent States working with each city to develop its own volunteer center. This period of time cemented her reputation for working internationally and for helping to create the network of volunteer centers later known as VolunteerNet.

Today, Schindler remains active as a faculty member of the Institute for Advanced Training in Volunteer Management based at Community Service Volunteers (CSV) in London, England. She is a consistent presenter at the annual Volonteurope conference that takes place in a different European capital city each year, and she presents regularly at conferences worldwide.

She has received numerous honors and awards during her career. At AVA’s 2004 International Conference on Volunteer Administration in Portland, Oregon, USA, she was recognized with an AVA Lifetime Membership Award. This honor is given to someone for “significant contributions to the association, to volunteerism, and to the profession of volunteer resources management over the course of his or her career.” In bestowing this award, AVA noted that Schindler is “passionate about the role of volunteerism in the reformation of civil society and is an effective spokesperson throughout the world.”

Her most enjoyable work comes from working with “people of promise” around the globe. Often they find their way to her home in Sun City, Arizona, USA, and there the true passion of this engaging woman becomes evident. Since 1996, she has run an informal “host program” for individuals she has met in her worldwide travels. From Schindler’s perspective, “These individuals have great potential, but limited opportunity. They are trying hard to develop a volunteer program by the book. If they could just see how it’s done...” And that is exactly what Schindler offers through her network of colleagues and volunteer connections.

Over the years, visitors from Poland, South Africa, Romania, Mongolia, Kazakhstan and the former Czechoslovakia, and other countries have visited with local programs and people during the day and met around Schindler’s kitchen table in the evening. They talk about “the most significant thing they learned during the day” and from that perspective what ideas could work in their own country and community. The focus is on the possibilities, not a prescribed format or structure.

Recently, visitors from the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Uzbekistan as well as from England toured Arizona and its police departments, churches, hospitals, and more. These people of promise will take what they learn back to their homes around the world where the spirit of volunteerism burns brightly. When they go back armed with new ideas and information, “you see immediate growth—from nothing to something extraordinary,” Schindler says.

This year, her own travels will take her to South Africa, England, and Cambodia. No matter where she goes she recognizes that “volunteerism is its own little community. You can speak the language of volunteerism anywhere



## >> CIVIL SOCIETY

“Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women’s organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trades unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy group.”

Information on civil society and the London School of Economics and Political Science can be found at:

[http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what\\_is\\_civil\\_society.htm](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/what_is_civil_society.htm)

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In a recent interview with Schindler, she shared her thoughts on volunteerism, the role of volunteer resources managers, and key lessons learned in her extensive work and travels.



### WHAT IS THE STATE OF VOLUNTEERISM AROUND THE WORLD?

“It is going like wild fire. Every place you go, people understand—at least theoretically—what’s involved. Volunteerism is a common word around the world. Also, ‘engagement of citizens,’ and ‘civil society.’ We [in North America] need to recognize what is happening elsewhere and understand that what is being done may be different from our own experience. Volunteerism is culturally different from one country to another and it is important to be aware of the differences.”

“In the United States, volunteerism was a necessity—it built the country. Now though, for many, volunteering is a leisure time activity.” In the U.S. in particular, youth are encouraged to volunteer via community service and service

Previous page: Arlene’s table of collections—West African bronzes, Chinese cloisonné, Hiutchel beadwork—represent the memories of the persons and the experiences from which each object has come to her; Above: Arlene’s Cross Wall of over 1,000 crosses representing the unique expressions of the world’s many and diverse cultures.

Schindler believes that the “Western idea of volunteering is too organized,” having been built on the human resource model. The structure and processes of volunteer programs mirror human resource business practices—with a reliance on forms, procedures, legalities, and the like. She worries that volunteer creativity and spontaneity may be stifled under the strict structure utilized by many programs.

learning opportunities in exchange for school credit or as part of the school curriculum. From Schindler’s perspective, these “are wonderful programs, but they are not volunteering.” In other countries, involvement “is a personal obligation because people are trying to build their society. Young people especially want to participate to help their country move forward.”

No matter where her travels take her, Schindler’s goal when working with others is to help them find peer models that work for them. She doesn’t push a particular idea or perspective; rather, she encourages others to consider their best course of action. She says, “I’m a provocateur, not a proselytizer. There are no ‘shoulds,’ but would this work? Could this work in your community?”

#### **WHAT IS VOLUNTEERISM’S ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CIVIL SOCIETY?**

In countries around the world, “there is the individual volunteer—this has always happened.” Now, something else continues to emerge in many countries. “There is the collective community volunteer effort where people and organizations do things jointly. This is the new thing—the new phenomenon—doing things as a group. The implication for civic engagement is the development of a civil society.”

According to the London School of Economics and Political Science, “Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values... It is the set of institutions, organisations and behaviour situated between the state, the business world, and the family... (and involves) forms of social participation and engagement...”

“Volunteer activism is a very important force in every society.” While Schindler feels

you “can have volunteerism in a non-civil society,” she emphatically states, “you cannot have a civil society without volunteerism.”

#### **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEER RESOURCES MANAGERS AROUND THE WORLD?**

“Many, many countries have volunteers in programs with people whose partial responsibility it is to manage volunteers. In other places, with an NGO (nongovernmental organization), this role is a very small part.” Generally, “people are managing organizations and projects—only a small part of their job is focused on managing the volunteers themselves.”

Schindler believes that the “Western idea of volunteering is too organized,” having been built on the human resource model. The structure and processes of volunteer programs mirror human resource business practices—with a reliance on forms, procedures, legalities, and the like. She worries that volunteer creativity and spontaneity may be stifled under the strict structure utilized by many programs.

“In the United States, we’re a ‘suing’ society. I’ve never had to talk about the law and legal issues in board trainings overseas.” In other countries where the project versus the management of the people is the focus, she notes that “some things slip through the cracks, but the staff don’t have so much paperwork, and they have great programs.” She hopes other countries can avoid some of the pitfalls of “Western” style volunteering and stay focused on evaluating the end product of a program or effort versus how the volunteers performed.

Training also takes a different track in other parts of the world. One of the major areas that needs attention is “helping people understand how a volunteer is different from a paid worker.”

In the United States, “we’re behind in our training. In my early training days, I used to spend a week training on recruitment and retention of volunteers. Can you imagine? Many involved in volunteer efforts in Europe are professionals and physicians—they know management and have college degrees. A training can truly be done in half a day.”

#### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE KEY LESSONS LEARNED IN YOUR WORK AND GLOBAL TRAVELS?**

Most important, “we need to listen—share ideas—pose questions. In many countries, people see volunteerism as a solution to problems in their society. We must be careful not to push our systems and social hang-ups onto others and assume that our social problems are theirs.

“We need to be more inclusive and culturally sensitive. While language has never been a problem in my visits to different countries, we do need to be conscious of words that have different meanings. I don’t speak any other languages and have been fortunate to always find someone who speaks English to help me. I’ve also found that I speak ‘universal’—the language of volunteerism.”

In an article written at the time of the International Year of Volunteers in 2001, Diane Perez-Buck of the United Nations Volunteer Programme wrote, “It is no exaggeration to affirm that volunteers are one of the most valuable assets of any country. There is ample evidence that volunteering builds social and human capital, it enhances social inclusion, it is a proven source of reconciliation and reconstruction in divided societies ...”<sup>1</sup>

Schindler couldn’t agree more. “We are in the world-changing field. Volunteers make the difference, and we are privileged to participate with them.” VM

<sup>1</sup> Perez-Buck, Diane. *The International Year of Volunteers 2001: A Catalyst for Pro-volunteer Policies and Legislation. The Social Economy and Law (SEAL) Project. Autumn 2001 Volume 4 Number 2. Downloaded from: <http://www.efc.belgi-bin/articlepublisher.pl?filename=DB-SE-10-01-1.html>.*