

Susan Ellis, Author And Business Owner

# Volunteering Isn't Dying, It's Changing

By Nancy Plank  
Sunday News Staff Writer

"Americans accuse themselves of being apathetic, yet we believe we can produce great changes if we enlist the aid of enough people. That belief is a belief in volunteerism."

Susan J. Ellis believes in volunteerism. In fact she has made a career of it. As a consultant and trainer in volunteerism, she founded her own company, ENER-GIZE, which helps organizations increase their effective utilization of volunteers.

The Philadelphia resident has also taught courses and directed workshops throughout the country on the administration of volunteer programs and written articles for professional journals. And with co-author Katherine H. Noyes she has written a book "By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers."

Susan, who spoke at Linden Hall, Lititz, recently during a Girl Scout Leaders' Weekend, said the book was an outgrowth of her crusade to eliminate the stereotype of the volunteer as a white, middle class woman. "We try to show in the book," Susan said, "that volunteerism is not limited to one race or class any more than to one sex."

The book, which is aimed at a general audience, concerns itself with the multitude of citizens who fall between the lines of history books, but who stood on the front lines when history was being made. It recounts how Americans affirmed their rights and responsibilities as citizens by becoming involved in shaping their own future.

Susan said the Revolutionary War was in fact an effort begun by volunteers, primarily groups of men who were associated with lodges which she likened to today's Elks or Masons. "You don't pay anybody to create a revolution," the dark-haired author said. "Initially it was absolutely a volunteer effort."

As the country developed, she continued, each group of immigrants would set up networks to help their newly arrived countrymen. These networks extended down even to the slaves who were brought here against their will, a fact that Susan felt was well brought out in the television special "Roots."

Today, she said, volunteering is not dying, but it is changing. People are no longer content just to go door to door collecting money for a worthy cause. Instead she pointed out, they are exploring the benefits of what volunteerism can do for them as individuals and what

they can do to benefit society in a meaningful way. "People don't volunteer for causes they don't think are going to succeed," she said.

What most volunteers hope to get from their efforts is one of several things.

For the young and for the housewife who hopes to move into paid employment, volunteering can be an excellent way to explore various career fields before making a permanent commitment to any one area. Susan has used teenaged volunteers in several programs she directs in the Philadelphia area and has found they can be most effective because "they have no preconceived notions."

Oftentimes, people volunteer because it helps them achieve something and get recognition for some area of their lives. It can also be a way of living one's fantasies. Frequently, she said, men who are volunteer firemen and ambulance drivers find their donated hours an excellent way of acting out every little boy's dream of being a fireman.

In the case of the Little League coach or the scout troop leader, Susan said, volunteer efforts are often the result of a desire to help another member of one's family.

Volunteering also provides a sense of belonging in an impersonal society and gives a feeling of power to those who may be stuck in a powerless paying job.

Finally, she said, volunteering can be fun if one approaches it as a form of recreation, a way of amusing oneself without spending any money in the process. However, she added, most people don't like to admit they enjoy their volunteer work because, "we're into that Puritan ethic that says if you don't feel like a martyr, you can't be helping."

Susan, who said she considers herself a feminist and backs up the statement by pointing out that she owns her own company, is well aware of the attacks some feminist groups have made on women who volunteer. However, she pointed to a government study made in 1974 which showed that one in four Americans do volunteer work, and of this number 60 percent hold some sort of paying job. "So, you see," Susan said, "the two things are not mutually exclusive."

"The feminists say volunteers have a low status," she continued, "but policymakers and boards of directors have a high status, and they're volunteers."

She is quick to point out, however, that she does consider some forms of volunteering to be exploitation. "If a hospital auxiliary raises thousands of dollars for a

hospital and then has no say in how the hospital is run, I consider that exploitation. The remedy though is to give them a voice, not to stop volunteering. Volunteers have a right to have input into any organization in which they serve and also to express what they're hoping to get out of it."

For example, she pointed out, if a woman hopes her volunteer experience will someday lead to a paid position, she should not hesitate to make that known and to say she plans to use her experience on a resume. In fact, Susan said, Federal law now allows applicants for Civil Service jobs to list volunteer work as experience with two years of volunteering equal to one year's paid employment.

In her role as adviser to organizations which use volunteers, she said she tries to get across the message that "to run a good volunteer program, you can't just have a good heart." The organizer must know how to utilize schedules and make effective use of people from a variety of age groups. Organizations which formerly depended on daytime volunteers must realize, she emphasized, that they have to learn to accommodate people whose schedules only allow for evening and weekend assignments. Also, she added, they can reassign daytime assignments to senior citizens and teenagers.

Senior citizens find volunteering "a great way to keep active and healthy," Susan said. And many schools are cooperating in release programs for teenagers who receive credit for their volunteer work done during school hours.

The concept of a volunteer coordinator is a relatively new field, Susan said, that's really beginning to blossom now. She teaches a graduate level course at the Pennsylvania State University on "The Administration and Management of Volunteer Programs," but added that the "field is still small enough for me to know most of the people around the country and even around the world who are involved in it."

As the expert who wrote the book on volunteering, Susan had one final comment to make on the subject. Mentioning just several of the areas where volunteers play an important role (such as the arts, politics, ecology, consumerism, hospitals, disaster services and foreign exchange programs), she said, "Volunteerism is so pervasive in our society that it is invisible. I can't think of any aspect of our society where volunteerism is not important."



Photo By Marshall Dussinger

**Volunteer advocate Susan Ellis, who co-authored "By The People: A History of Americans as Volunteers," said she spent three years writing the book partially as a crusade against the stereotype of a volunteer as a white middle class woman.**