

THE VOLUNTEER OF THE SEVENTIES*

by

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The passing of the decade known as the sixties brought also the passing of the symbolic volunteer known as Lady Bountiful. The precise cause of her demise is still uncertain. Some say she was walking in the Middle-of-the-Road, as usual. Lined up on the left were youths, demanding participation. On the other side were elders, supported by prerogatives. The weight of both sides caused a deep schism, and Lady Bountiful, so it is alleged, fell to her death through the Generation Gap.

Others say some adolescent addicts, on a bad trip, mistook her for an Establishment opiate, and gobbled her up. Still others say she melted in a ghetto fire. They report she was carrying a basket of goodies when a horde of slum dwellers, yelling "burn, baby, burn" put the torch to a market which routinely raised prices on Mother's Day, which in the sixties meant the day welfare checks arrived.

There is still some support to the story that she was bringing a band-aid to a fracture patient who had been waiting two days in the emergency admitting room of a hospital which served Medicaid beneficiaries. Suddenly, local residents joined by thousands of involved students, stormed the halls demanding a confrontation. Lady Bountiful was not one to move with the crowd. She was so jostled and pushed that her heart, already enlarged, simply failed.

Personally, I do not think Lady Bountiful is dead. I think she is alive and well and working part-time, disguised as a staff aide, in order to send her last child through college.

But in any event, agencies need plan no recognition ceremonies for her, because the recipients of her largesse scraped their thanks as she expected. She always said her reward would come in Heaven, and she carefully paved her road with Good Intentions. She was so upright, her head was already in the clouds.

The volunteer of the seventies, I predict, will not be a lady. She may even be a he, a young student of either sex, a retired professional, a welfare mother, a former felon, or an industrial giant. But whatever the age, whatever the sex, whatever the economic stratum, the volunteer of the seventies will bridge the generation gap and will offer no opiates. The volunteer of this new decade will bring no band-aids to heal a fractured society and will cool the heat generated by social injustice through playing an advocacy role.

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Earlier decades witnessed the birth of the new volunteer. He was weaned in the trauma of social upheaval. He learned to speak amidst a Babel of divisive voices. He entered a world which threatened anomie and depersonalization. He rejected this world and vowed to do something to change it. A troubled Establishment has seen students demonstrate a blind impatience with their elders, and with the institutions created by their elders. But as volunteers, students emerged in the sixties to show both insight and heroic patience in serving the retarded, in tutoring the illiterate, in understanding the poor. Students will be in the forefront as volunteers. They will forge a meaningful role for themselves regardless of agency policies toward them. A wise society will welcome their services and woo their opinions.

Retired persons, once forced to retire as volunteers even before their employers displaced them, will emerge as a potent force in the ranks of the new volunteer army. They will find a lost identification in volunteer tasks. Wise agencies will make it possible for them to experience the social contacts they long for, the interaction with other human beings, and the knowledge that they are needed.

Persons who once were served will serve others. The poor will help each other claim from a grudging society what has been allotted to them legally and in so doing they will help each other climb out of their dark dungeon of poverty. A wise agency will help them.

Addicts, both alcoholic and narcotic, will volunteer to help each other with the understanding and knowledge, with the realism and identification which only they possess. Prisoners, who have absorbed the concept of their keepers, that every human being has the capacity to change, will change and they will show the same faith that the attitudes and methods of their keepers, too, can change. They will work to reform the institutions which were created to reform them. They will help others who once were losers to win by staying within the law.

Professionals will do "their thing" as volunteers, finding fulfillment, like the three district attorneys in the Bronx who spend their working days convicting young offenders and return in the evening as volunteers, to help misdemeanants and felons whom someone else convicted discern why they were self-defeating.

Men will be involved as never before, not only as impersonal fund raisers, not only as parent scout leaders, not only as role examples to youth, but also as social architects, as practical facilitators, as advocates of the deprived.

Recognition that volunteer programs are not without cost will finally permeate. Recognition will also come that expenditures for volunteer programs purchase what money cannot buy—citizen awareness, citizen concern, and the neighborly knowhow, and the heart, the personal caring that has no place in professionalism.

Before the end of the decade, we shall see degrees offered in volunteer administration. We shall see, too, the birth of a society or guild of volunteers. The purpose will be to demand a meaningful role for volunteers from reluctant agencies, to lobby for support for volunteers and volunteer programs, to provide a medium for the exchange of information through publications, institutes and conferences.

Lack of funds for coordinators and training will slow the volunteer movement. Resistance of paid staff will retard the use of volunteers. But no force is great enough to stop the concern of the citizen for his fellowman. Through the channel of volunteering, the public will return to the public agency, because that is "where it's at."