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# The World According to Volunteer Experience

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

March  
2002

Unbelievably, March 2002 marks 25 years since I founded Energize. It has been an incredible quarter century in countless ways and I feel privileged to have participated in the growth of the volunteer field. It has been inspiring and rewarding, if also at times frustrating and maddening. But it has never, ever been dull! And I look forward to what may lie around the next bend of this ongoing, curvy, up and down road.

Writing this monthly Hot Topic during the last six years has often been therapeutic, allowing me to vent indignation, tilt at windmills, and seek the comfort of shared minds among my colleagues. On this special milestone anniversary, however, I want to focus on the positives. As I reflect on my work in volunteerism, I realize that devotion to this field brings with it a world view that this is quite special, particularly within a culture so focused on economic gain. So I hereby offer a list of truisms that I believe are fundamental to success in volunteer leadership. The funny thing is that these same philosophies are totally applicable to just about anything. So maybe this is my version of "Everything I Needed to Know in Life, I Learned from Working with Volunteers."

- If it's worth doing, it's worth doing even if there is no money to pay for it.
- Progress is made when more people say "I can do something about that" than say "that's not my job" or "it's none of my business."
- Volunteering brings out the best in people...and working with the best in people engenders optimism even in the face of pessimism.
- We have the power to act on what we can dream, not just on what we think we can afford.
- When we look for the *essence* of individuals instead of judging them by their formal credentials, we often find that being "qualified" to do something lies more in attitude than in experience.

- When you are not "in" the box," it's easier to think "out" of it (which is why it is best to recruit volunteers who are as different from paid staff as possible).
- Never forget to say thank you.
- The best service occurs when the giver benefits as much as the recipient.
- Every revolution begins with a step taken by one person and that person is always a volunteer. (No one is ever paid to rebel.)
- Volunteers are the silver lining in the cloud of disaster.
- While it is popular to praise the work of "quiet heroes," the most important social change has always been achieved by those who are loud and visible.
- Volunteering is an equalizer. It finds the common denominator among otherwise diverse people and allows them to work together to meet goals that matter to them all.
- Volunteering is a strategy applied in the same way by proponents of fundamentally opposed sides of an issue. So volunteers are not automatically right - they just believe they are.
- Actions speak louder than words or checkbooks.
- There is no skill so specialized that someone will not freely donate it - if you're flexible as to when you get access to it.
- When it comes to sex, we understand that paying for it does not make it love, even if the technique is great. (So why do we think receiving money is always a sign of respect?)
- When you feel powerless, doing something alongside others who care as you do puts you back in control.
- When you don't have to meet external hiring requirements, people can rise to their level of competence regardless of age, background, supposed disability, or other difference.
- The least competent people are the most threatened by offers of help or new ideas.
- Everyone has exactly the same number of hours in a day. Be conscious of the value of the time some people share generously with you...and never waste it.

- Value mavericks and dreamers. They may sometimes be irritants, but often plant the seeds of change.
- The only things necessary to accomplish a goal are: confidence, determination, time, effort and the participation of a growing number of advocates. Money is nice, but it can't substitute for the other ingredients.
- We are limited only by our imagination and our unwillingness to ask for help. When we ask, we get. Often in amazing abundance.

What have you learned from your time working with volunteers? I look forward to seeing what credos all of you will add!

Thank you for your collegial wisdom and enthusiasm over the last 25 years.

Here's to the future....

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*Posted 2002Apr19*

***Submitted by Anne Hislop, Training Officer, Volunteer Development Scotland, Stirling, Scotland***

Congratulations, Susan. Sustaining your level of energy over the years is an achievement in itself ! I look forward to seeing you again in Scotland in September.

*Posted 2002Mar28*

***Submitted by Welthea Christman, Coordinator of Volunteer, Alzheimer's Association Rochester Chapter & Chairperson of RAAVS- Rochester Area Administrators of Volunteer Services, New York, USA***

Susan ~ Congratulations on 25 years of boundless enthusiasm for the world of volunteers; and the encouragement and support you have provided to all who coordinate/manage/direct (whatever it is called) volunteers. We couldn't "do it" without them, and do it so much better because of you! Thank you for your inspiration!

*Posted 2002Mar28*

***Submitted by Gerald (Jerry) Pannozzo, CVA, Assistant Director, Mayor's Voluntary Action Center, New York, USA***

Congratulations! Four months before you started Energize, I moved to NYC. Twenty-five years ago I was focused on my first career. I met you following my career change in 1993. Your energy, enthusiasm, wit and the tools you had developed (I hate re-inventing the wheel) made a positive impression on me during the workshops I attended-- as did your books.

"What have I learned from working with volunteers?" The following statements are borrowed.

- No one volunteers with the intention to fail. - Set them up to succeed.

- Treat the paid staff as well as you treat the volunteers.
- Respect each individual's comfort zone -- not everyone is the trailblazer, the mentor, the negotiator, the follower, etc.
- Allow the individual to discover his/her unique contribution.
- It is sometimes a challenge to apply to "real life" what you learn at workshops / conferences. However, take baby steps rather than "no steps" and build on your successes.

It is the support of colleagues (as well as the debates) that have been a very significant component of my experience as a volunteer administrator. I second your motion, "Here's to the future."

*Posted 2002Mar21*

***Submitted by Russ Ayers, President, American Ukrainian Medical Project, Seattle, WA USA***

Congratulations and thank you! One meets some of the finest people in service to others.

*Posted 2002Mar20*

***Submitted by Sarah H. Elliston, Sr. Volunteer Resource Associate, United Way & Community Chest***

I feel humbled by all that has been said. I will add my paltry words- how to make them as impactful? Congratulations Susan, and thank-you for always stretching my mind and helping me understand this zany, energized and always interesting field in which I (like so many others) found myself. I always say that you are the thinker who is two steps out in front of the rest of us, challenging us to look and think again. Thanks for your dedication and scholarship.

*Posted 2002Mar20*

***Submitted by Kevin Ryan, President, Community Hero Card, Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota USA***

Congratulations on achieving a very major milestone. I have enjoyed reading your monthly essays and find your realistic view of the relationship between mission and margin very energizing. On behalf of our private, public collaborative, we wish you Gods speed for the next 25 years!

*Posted 2002Mar19*

***Submitted by Jan Masaoka, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, San Francisco/San Jose, California***

Here's one more truism: if Susan Ellis says it, it's true.

*Posted 2002Mar19*

***Submitted by Lynn M. Teatro, Durham East Housing Outreach Worker, John Howard Society of Durham, Ontario, Canada***

Susan: It has been many years since I have worked as a volunteer coordinator and yet I eagerly checkout your e-publication every time I receive my notice. The agency where I am currently employed has no formal volunteer program. However, we do take advantage of placement students from local colleges and secondary schools. Your articles remind me how valuable they are and how important it is to let them know how much they make our work easier, make our hours count for more and make our clients feel better served. And I think "The most important social change has always

bee achieved by those who are loud and visible." should be emblazoned on t-shirts and bumper stickers.

*Posted 2002Mar19*

***Submitted by Judy Cook, Regional Volunteer Coordinator St. John's Nursing Home Board, St John's Newfoundland, Canada***

Congratulations on 25 years. My work with coordinating volunteers over the past 15 years has given me so much joy -- and moments of frustrations as well --but so much more joy. As a person I've have grown mentally and spiritually because of, and along side of, volunteers. To some, I have been their mentor; others have been mine. All of then have shown a true understanding and compassion for caring for others. What a wonderful journey it is to spend each day of your work life with such caring people..

*Posted 18Mar2002*

***Submitted by Therese Caldwell, Volunteer Services Liaison, North Kitsap School District, Washington State, USA***

Congratulations, Susan! Here's to 25 more great, productive,inspired years! I am relatively new to the volunteer management world, with just one year under my belt. However, I have worked with volunteers as a volunteer for about 14 years. The single most important thing I have learned is the value of ongoing, clear communication, whether verbal, written or face-to-face. Things are so easily misunderstood - it's vital to have those open, varied channels of communication! This builds confidence and trust in your organization, encourages input and support from the community and fosters a wonderfully creative work environment.

*Posted 18Mar2002*

***Submitted by Alicia Pappas, Volunteer Coordinator-Tyler Police Department- Volunteers In Policing, Texas***  
CONGRATULATIONS SUSUN ON A JOB WELL DONE!! It was a pleasure meeting you in Dallas/Ft.Worth at the 1998 International Conference on Volunteer Administration. You are one "fired up" lady on volunteerism and the spirit is certainly catching by all who come in contact with you. Your books are outstanding and helped me create a new program at Tyler Police Department. A million thanks!!

*Posted 18Mar2002*

***Submitted by Mary Reynolds Babcock, Director of Volunteer Services,***

Thanks for reminding us of how fast time passes when you're having fun. Susan you are certainly to be commended for all you have done for the field and for folks personally and professionally. What I have learned over the past 37 years of working with volunteers would fill a book, when I take time to write it down. Just a few of the thing that have kept me going are:

- You can't buy caring.
- There is no substitute for believing you can make a difference.

- Youth are the future and are willing to do great things. We must take time to cultivate their spirit and allow them to become leaders who understand the importance of giving and sharing self with others.

Thank you for all you continue to do.

*Posted 12Mar2002*

***Submitted by Stephanie Linder, Project Manager, Center for Volunteer Engagement, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, California, USA***

Congratulations Susan! What a wonderful piece - I've forwarded it on to the Planned Parenthood Network of Volunteer Advocates. Your list would make a nice handout to staff for National Volunteer Week.

*Posted 11Mar2002*

***Submitted by Sheri Wilensky, Director, Volunteer Outreach, American Lung Association, New York, NY***

Wow, Susan. 25 years. Remarkable! Congratulations -- I know I would not be able to perform my job as effectively if it wasn't for you, your creativity and your wonderful publications and resources. Thank you for all you do and for continually giving of yourself.

*Posted 8Mar2002*

***Submitted by Mary Ellen LaBruto, Judicial Volunteer Coordinator, New Jersey Superior Court, Ocean County, New Jersey, USA***

Let me join the chorus of voices congratulating you on this milestone in your career, and in extending my abiding sense of gratitude, for the countless times you have soothed and "energized" our spirits, and spurred us on to do better than we ever dreamed we could. You have done for us what we see our volunteers do every day. For sharing the deep well of your imagination, intellect, and integrity, I will be forever thankful.

*Posted 5Mar2002*

***Submitted by Kate Quinn, Director, United Way Volunteer Center Lancaster, PA USA***

As usual Susan, you know and elucidate all the good stuff. Congratulations on 25 years in a difficult business. And, after a lot of years, here's the only thing I've ever really learned...all trouble springs from the fact that people don't know what they don't know.

*Posted 5Mar2002*

***Submitted by Cissy Seibel, Director, Volunteer Center, Center For Nonprofit Resources, Dayton, Ohio USA***

Congratulations Susan. You have brought so many of us to a new level of professionalism. A level we must strive to keep for our future Volunteer Administrators. You have said to us over the years, in many different ways, we must change and evolve, we must bring in new people and make the ground fertile for their ideas, we must accept and support the new types of volunteers coming our way. I have learned so much from volunteers over the past 11 years I could write a book. But mostly I've learned "if you can't change your mind, you can't change anything." And, that not only CAN volunteers change

the world but they have for centuries. From voting rights to disaster relief; school reform to building homeless shelters. Volunteers are, and continue to be, the power behind our great county.

*Posted 5Mar2002*

***Submitted by Douglas Mackay, Volunteer Service & Resource Project, Pennsylvania USA***

Congratulations, Susan, on achieving the silver anniversary. In this year of Olympian feats, you've been a gold medal winner. I salute you for 25 years of undaunted service, inspiration, guidance, and leadership. As usual, too, your remarks are right on the money, worthy of reprints and pass alongs, a volunteer's stock-in-trade. Few people have your quality to engage, enlighten, encourage, and enthuse. Where would I be or where would many be without your support?

Though yours has not been an effort of volunteer service, it's been in service to volunteers, which amounts to the same thing. Your windmills have never been figments of your imagination or metaphors, but real life challenges facing entrenched and difficult points of view. You have always had the courage to espouse and to question but also the willingness to accept, hallmarks of effective volunteering. As your accomplishment points out, effort and perseverance mark the qualities of anyone engaged either with or in the volunteer spirit. Where would "we" be without your energy facing the battles or defining the allies and exposing the enemies of volunteerism? Volunteering is democracy... and you have been its champion. Thank you.

*Posted 5Mar2002*

***Submitted by Jayne Cravens, United Nations Volunteers, Bonn, Germany***

Susan's work -- her workshops, her books, her discussions over beer at the Broken Spoke -- have had a profound impact on me, the way I do my professional work, and the way I volunteer myself. The Virtual Volunteering Project would never have had legitimacy or credibility without her involvement and her generosity -- and online volunteering would not have the impact it does now without her influence. To me, she is a key player in keeping volunteer management high profile and "honest." She said "Value mavericks and dreamers. They may sometimes be irritants, but often plant the seeds of change." Here's to my favorite maverick. I rely so much on her books and Web sites, and I'm looking forward to many more years of resources and insights.

*Posted 5Mar2002*

***Submitted by Rosemary Sage, Executive Director, Volunteering SA, South Australia***

Congratulations Susan on 25 years of interest and support for the volunteer community. Once again your wit and wisdom have a way of making very profound statements that we all enjoy using in our work. Keep up the great work and Thank you.

*Posted 3Mar2002*

***Submitted by Rustie Brooke, Wizard Productions/Civic Engagements, New York City***

Congratulations and thank you Susan, for 25 years of continuous trailblazing. The international volunteerism community is richer in all aspects, by your thoughtful contributions and I wish you many more years of courage and clarity.

I share with you and your readers these few lines of Schopenhauer that accompany me in my travels:

"Thus, the task is not so much to see  
what no one yet has seen,  
but to think what nobody yet has thought  
about that which everybody sees."

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