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## What We See, or Don't: Volunteers in Television, Films, and Novels

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Earlier this week I watched an episode of an American television show called *7th Heaven* in which a church needed to raise money for a new roof. Their star fundraising volunteer was a curmudgeonly old woman who was shown working her way through a telephone list of parishioners, strong-arming them for donations with blackmail (as in, give money or I'll tell your wife who you were with last Tuesday). The word "volunteer" was not used at all in the hour show, but clearly viewers were expected to recognize the scenario from their own past experiences. How might someone interpret the implications here about service or philanthropy?

Occasionally there is some good news for volunteers on the media front. Also this week, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* aired an episode called "Futility," about a serial rapist. Integral to the story was how rape and domestic abuse victims are supported by many social services, including volunteer counselors, one of whom was important to the show's plot. In fact, one of the star actresses appeared on the *Today Show* with the director of the Mt. Sinai Hospital (NYC) SAVI program to discuss the message embedded in the script, and the show's official Web site provides related links. See: [link no longer available, 2014]

Back in 1979 I wrote an article for *Voluntary Action Leadership* (the predecessor of what is today *Volunteer Leadership*) entitled "The Mass Media Image of Volunteers," the premise of which is still relevant today. Volunteerism suffers either from invisibility in popular culture or from gross stereotyping. (If you want to take a walk down memory lane, [click here](#) to read the original article.) Statistics claim that over 40% of the US population volunteers – but you wouldn't know it from the storylines of favorite shows or films. I doubt the situation is much different in other countries.

It seems fitting to be discussing this subject now which, as I write, is National Volunteer Week in North America. Once again, as I've come to expect, the Week is mostly unpublicized and ignored. Perhaps the problem is that the impact of volunteers is so pervasive, it's hard to raise volunteering

into the limelight all at once. Maybe the goal of “recognition” of volunteers is to stop seeing service as something extraordinary and start seeing it as a natural fact of life.

I would love to see volunteering treated to the “product placement” attention so in vogue with commercial advertisers. A consumer product such as a brand of soda or cereal is used within a movie scene by the characters in an everyday way, without comment – but the label is clearly visible. The subliminal message is: These cool characters drink X or eat Y, so you should, too!

Just think what might be the ripple effect if volunteering were similarly incorporated into mass media like this:

- A popular sit com character is periodically seen on his or her way to a volunteer activity (wearing a uniform or t-shirt, or carrying equipment).
- A professional or businessperson character serves on a local board of directors, which elicits story lines.
- Some heartthrob character meets a hot date at a volunteer event in which they are both participating.
- Shows based in high schools referred occasionally to community service projects.
- Any character’s “other side” was demonstrated by the passion s/he has for a volunteer assignment.
- Daytime dramas (“soaps”), which obviously deal in the minutia of their character’s lives, placed some scenes at a blood drive or an environmental center or anywhere volunteers work. (According to an Energize staffer, at least one member of the Quartermaine family on *General Hospital* does serve on the hospital board!)

Children's television shows and books ought to be fertile ground for mentioning volunteering, including showing families volunteering together. As our Webmaster (with 2 children) pointed out to me, "new kid superheroes like Pokemon and SailorMoon are actually volunteers saving the world from imminent destruction. Hmm... What does that say?"

### **A New Media Registry that You Help Compile**

Given the international geographic spread of our site visitors, and the many variations in ages, tastes, and interests, you undoubtedly already have other examples of volunteering in fiction that I haven't seen or heard about – both good and bad. So I'd like to enlist all of you in compiling an ongoing registry of all mentions of volunteering in fiction – whether on television or in films and novels (or other places such as comic strips, advertisements, etc.). If we get enough of a response to this Hot Topic, we'll use those entries as a start for a new section in the Collective Wisdom area of the site and we'll keep it going over time.

This will be fun, but it's also an important barometer of public attitudes about what we do. Are we marginal or integral to society? Is our image one of role model, trend setter, or nerd? We expect

fictional characters to hold a job, have a family, and enjoy recreational activities (especially sports). Maybe someday it will be so commonplace to also expect them to do volunteer work that we won't need a registry anymore!

Start sharing your volunteer "sightings" now!

Related Topics: [Image of Volunteering](#)

**Submitted on 29Nov2003 by Sonya Turner, Volunteer Coordinator, Senior Services of Northern Kentucky, Kentucky**

I don't think anyone has yet mentioned the Frasier episode where Frasier volunteered for Habitat for Humanity. He obviously enjoyed the experience, being very attached to the house and proud of his contribution. (I think they let him hold a drill and do other meaningless work). Things went a little down hill when Frasier kept coming back to the house to offer decorating tips to the new owners. I wonder if Habitat thought this was a good promotion for their program or not?!!

**Submitted on 25Nov2003 by Susan J. Ellis, Energize, Inc.**

"West Wing" once again this week included mention of volunteers. This time it was a conversation between Toby and a staffer who was cleaning up the office but started up a conversation about the US budget. She comments about "paying volunteers in AmeriCorps...what kind of volunteers get paid money?" Toby responds with praise for AmeriCorps as a government program that actually accomplishes something. She just laughs and is not convinced.

**Submitted on 6Nov2003 by Laura Philips, Volunteer Coordinator, Eugene Public Library, Oregon, U.S.**

I'm a year behind in watching "Six Feet Under," because I don't see the season til it comes out on video. But at least in the past, one of the main characters is shown regularly (not just in Dec.) volunteering with a free meal service in the parks. We've seen him at the volunteer site a number of times, and his connections with others involved in the activity are pivotal to the plot.

Overall, I think it's a positive portrayal of volunteering. It's used in a realistically complex way, to show both the character's strength and weakness: the strength being that he is a good, giving, responsible person, who feels an appropriate commitment to lending others a hand; the weakness being that he is driven to keep busy in order to avoid dealing with his personal life and, relatedly, driven to appear "perfect" in order to compensate for feelings of inadequacy/shame about being gay. That makes it sound like a negative portrayal -- but he is actually a very sympathetic character; the audience roots for his happiness; and it appears clear that he is a volunteerin' kind of guy, who will continue to volunteer even after he resolves his various issues and no longer needs the time-filler or self-esteem booster. (Unless those of you who've seen the more recent season have already found out otherwise...!)

**Submitted on 30Oct2003 by Susan J. Ellis, Energize, Inc.** Glad to see we're keeping this list going!

"West Wing" has a new unpaid intern in a small recurring role right now, and he's pretty obnoxious -- snobby and snooping into everything. Someone has assigned him to Josh, who is totally irritated

about imposition. No job description seems in evidence. Last night, immediately following this example, "Law and Order" ran an episode in which a suspect used the alibi that he "was at the library doing my volunteer shift -- you can ask my supervisor there." The police do ask and learn he never showed up. This so-called volunteer ends up arrested as the prime suspect. With volunteers like these two, it's no wonder we get a bad rap!

***Submitted on 29Oct2003 by Jerald H Curtis, Special Projects Coordinator, Michigan***

In the Oct 27, 2003 episode of "Everyone Loves Raymond," Ray is 'volunteered' to work in a hospital. He goes and discovers that it is better than he thought it would be. Good until his wife gets upset that he is gone so much and cons his brother and then makes it into another family conflict.

***Submitted on 29Aug2003 by Kimberly Thomas, Manager of Volunteer Services/ Center for Economic Progress IL/USA***

I think you are right. On one episode of "Will and Grace", Will and Grace volunteered for a children program working with a group of children to perform a play. It was very funny. If we had more popular television program to embrace volunteerism on the waves, maybe it would encourage others to volunteers.

***Submitted on 23May03 by Marjorie Moore, Volunteer Coordinator- Radio Information Service, Illinois USA***

ER and Will and Grace have recently shown characters contributing in the *Doctors Without Borders* program. In fact, the entire season finale of ER focused on Dr. Carter's and Dr. Kovac's experiences in Africa.

***Submitted on 22May03 by Scott Lundell, Assistant Director, Information and Volunteer Centre for Strathcona County, Alberta, Canada***

There is another Simpsons episode where volunteering is demonstrated, albeit with an unscreened, untrained, and, yes, unsupervised volunteer. In the episode entitled, "In Marge We Trust", Marge becomes guilted into becoming a volunteer. She does some chores around the church. "All done. I swept the aisles and put all the collection plates in the dishwasher. Oh -- and you wouldn't believe how many dead pigeons there were in the organ." Reverend Lovejoy responds, "Marge, you are a real timesaver. Do you know, thanks to you, that I discovered a form of shame that's gone unused for 700 years?" It continues. Finding he is getting frustrated with phone calls from advice seekers, Lovejoy pawns the job off on Marge and she becomes the "Listen Lady".

Later in the episode, Marge tries to explain her new opportunity to Homer. He questions her decision. "Do you know," he argues, "that so-called volunteers don't even get paid?" Toward the end of the episode, Marge gives bad advice to Ned Flanders who, as a result, ends up trapped in a Baboon exhibit at the zoo. (Where else?)

However, with all the faux-pas we see with volunteer management eyes, Marge does come out with a real gem of a quote. When she discovers she has given some really bad advice, she says in

exasperation, "Oh, I'm in way over my head. I mean, where do the helpers turn when they need help?"

***Submitted on 22May03 by Andy Fryar, President - Volunteering Australia***

I was watching the West Wing tonight (we are a few months behind in episodes here) and it was the episode where Sam and Will Bailey are announcing to the press Sam's team to run for election in California.

Will Bailey runs through the usual suspects telling the press the names of the various people who will hold a variety of posts around Sam in his efforts to be elected - The Campaign Manager, Finance Officer, Press Secretary, Marketing Manager etc. What was pleasing that included in the list was the role of Volunteer Coordinator!

***Submitted on 21May03 by Barbara Goldstein, Director of Volunteers, Montefiore, Beachwood, OH USA***

During local televised fundraising efforts for public television (such as a 4-day broadcast auction in Cleveland, OH), the on-air personalities lavish well-deserved praise on all the volunteers who help them throughout the year. In addition, many larger corporations recruit members of their staffs to serve as telephone bid-takers. In that way, the company gets great PR for its involvement, the "I'm-too-busy-to-volunteer" professionals see the merit of their one-time contribution, and the audiences benefit from the fine programming underwritten by the monies raised. While this kind of exposure isn't national, nor does it attract the number of people who gravitate to primetime network or cable offerings, it offers proof positive that volunteers have a dramatic effect on their communities.

***Submitted on 18May03 by Gerald (Jerry) Pannozzo, CVA, NY***

Do we remember the Murphy Brown episode about volunteering on Thanksgiving including the live turkeys? I'm hooked on "The Guardian" on CBS, which includes a court order community service component. The hot young lawyer forced to do his community service hours is not the only reason I watch. The scripts explore legal issues in the world of for-profit and the often under-represented world of those who assist individuals who can not afford legal council. Such an agency is were the voluntold is assigned. During one episode the good-looking and affluent lawyer is called on inflating his volunteer hours.

I don't have cable; however, thanks to a friend I'm able to watch "Queer As Folk". The local LGBT Center has Board members (yes volunteers) who are ethically challenged by the bad boy Brian (when forced to recognize him with an award following a gay bashing incident or when dealing with his unconventional methods for raising funds for them). The gals, Melanie and Lindsey fair much better in the role of volunteers for the Center. However, the winners are the two moms (Michael's and Justin's). One is an assertive veteran PFLAGer (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) who wears her volunteer pins proudly and the other a new and questioning volunteer for the cause. They also get involved with "promoting the vote" as volunteers. They make their gay kids proud as well as embarrassed at times -- and that's what parents do in real life.

***Submitted on 16May03 by Susan Ellis, Energize, Inc.***

Andy Fryar's posting about the opening segment of this season's "West Wing" made me realize that I neglected to mention the really excellent portrayal of volunteer work on that series last year. In the last several episodes of season 3, the show introduced recurring guest star Mark Harmon as Secret Service agent Simon Donovan, assigned as a bodyguard to Press Secretary C.J. Cregg. He was important in a story arc that included death threats to C.J. and a budding flirtation between them. In the last episode of the season he was senselessly killed. What was great about Simon was that being a volunteer was integrated into his character -- particularly to demonstrate his caring side.

Simon was a Big Brother to character Anthony Marcus. We discover this when Anthony turns up at the White House and, because he is an African-American teen, he is treated suspiciously by White House security. Simon vouches for him and allows him to stay until his shift ends. It's made quite clear that the two of them have a warm relationship that has lasted for a while (I believe Simon speaks of having volunteered for a few years). When Simon is killed, C.J. ends up trying to get Anthony a new volunteer from the staff. This sets up an interesting series of conversations about who has time and whether or not Charlie Young, the President's Assistant, ought to feel responsible because he is also young and black. As it turns out, Charlie does rise to the occasion.

It's hard to summarize the action briefly because this outstanding example of good media presentation of volunteering covered several episodes and was truly interwoven into the plot. We haven't heard anything about Anthony since Charlie became his volunteer, but perhaps he'll resurface next year.

***Submitted on 15May03 by Donna Phillips, Volunteer Programs Coordinator, Washington County Sheriff's Office, Oregon, USA***

Speaking strictly of product placement, I have noticed for years that the Red Cross symbol shows up often in scenes of public places in movies and television. Producers are willing to do this because they know it is an international symbol that almost everyone will recognize. It is easy to place, easy to see, and does not detract from the story line. Perhaps if we had a single symbol, recognized world-wide, that simply meant "Volunteer", then we could capture such an enduring form of "product placement" in the film industry.

***Submitted on 14May03 by Cara Blank, Director of Online Publications, Energize, Inc.***

I recently saw an episode of "The Simpsons" in which Homer Simpson is convicted of a misdemeanor for endangering the environment. The judge doles out punishment to Homer: a \$200 fine and community service. In the very next scene, we see Homer as a Meals-on-Wheels delivery man (wearing a baseball cap printed with the name Meals-on-Wheels) serving a TV dinner to an elderly man in a hospital bed. The elderly man points at an empty section of the TV dinner tray and asks in a nagging tone: "Isn't there supposed to be a fruit cobbler?" Homer gruffly replies: "We discontinued the cobbler." The elderly man accusingly sneers: "You smell like cobbler!" Homer retorts: "Let's not start those who-smells-like-what games."

We had quite a conversation about this show in the Energize office. President Susan Ellis pointed out that the TV script writers obviously did not do their homework about how Meals-on-Wheels operates and therefore misrepresented a valuable organization. Our Webmaster Kristin felt that the show commented more on community service and the elderly than reflecting on volunteerism. And I wondered about the age-old question about life and art: Do TV shows create ideas about volunteerism, or do they reflect ideas already circulating in our society? What do you think?

***Submitted on 13May03 by Valerie Sen, Program Director, Volunteer Center of Battle Creek, Michigan, USA***

I recently watched a movie called "Better Luck Tomorrow" that shows high school youth volunteering because "it will look good on my college application!" These straight A students are also engaged in drugs, a cheating ring at their school and other crimes. One of the scenes shows the main character arriving to do volunteer beach clean up, with tissues up his nose to stop the bleeding from doing too much cocaine. When they are done cleaning the beach, they sit down and give the kid a gun as a birthday gift. The dichotomy of drug addicted, criminal youth getting up early on a Saturday to do volunteer work for their "college application" speaks to me of a media example of mocking the motivation of youth volunteers. They are not giving of themselves for the good of the community, but for the good of themselves and their future. Great but disturbing movie!

***Submitted on 6May03 by Andy Fryar, President - Volunteering Australia***

The West Wing also featured a volunteer recently, in the opening episode of series 4 (The episode was called '20 hours in America'). For those who remember it, President Bartlett makes a speech on a soy bean farm in Indiana and Toby, Josh and Donna get stranded on the farm when the motorcade leaves without them. After getting a ride to the local town, it is a young local political volunteer who then takes the Whitehouse staffers on the next leg of their journey to a train station some distance away. From memory the volunteer was even allowed to say one or two profound things in the episode!

***Submitted on 5May03 by Christy O'Callaghan, Volunteer Resource Manager at Partners In Ending Hunger, Maine***

One movie that stands out to me big time around volunteering is Hardball with Keanu Reeves. It shows the impact mentoring and working with kids can have on an adult, just as much as on the kids. But it's also children's movies and not as highly watched by adults, who is really the one transformed by the experience.

Habitat for Humanity has been getting some of those "product shots" in shows like Gilmore Girls and Seventh Heaven. Both have high school aged girls going out to build houses (one's using it to get into college and one's trying to figure out her future and meets a boy instead). Falls flat, but it did put Habitat in a cool spotlight.

Other than that, volunteering tends to show up on holiday episodes. Feeding one meal in a soup kitchen or giving out gifts at one event. It doesn't seem to display it as a long-term commitment or

that people are in need beyond the holidays. A more powerful message would be showing more people who do things all the time, year round. Not just serving food or handing out presents, but the myriad of rolls a volunteer can play.

***Submitted on 5May03 by Cookie Allen, Volunteer Coordinator- Escondido Public Library, California, USA***

I, too, saw the episode of 7th Heaven and was offended. I didn't like the stereotypical "old cranky lady" scenario and the opinion that you have to be nasty to get people to give! I would love to see the reality of volunteering portrayed in the media, where actors volunteer as a matter of course. I'd like to see characters volunteering at libraries, schools, shelters and clinics and making it look fun and rewarding, and most importantly as something people do because they want to not because they expect something in return.

***Submitted on 5May03 by Marge Galla, Volunteer Coordinator, Southwest General Health Center Ohio/USA***

It is a shame it has to be found in "re-runs" but in The Golden Girls, mama Sophia is often involved in her hospital volunteering. Maybe that is part of the reason it is harder to get younger volunteers..the stereotype is retirees in peach pinafores?

***Submitted on 5May03 by Andy Fryar, President, Volunteering Australia***

Australia's most popular soap opera 'Home and Away' (...OK so now everyone knows I watch it!) features a drop-in centre, at which just about everyone on the show has volunteered at one time or another. What's even better is that during IYV, the Australian IYV posters were often used as props and were clearly visible on a regular basis.

Also, while not specifically media related, I have noticed that the major football arena here in Adelaide, 'AAMI Stadium' still features giant IYV / volunteering advertisements two years after IYV has finished!

***Submitted on 5May03 by Sarah Brown, Director of Membership Girl Scouts of Swift Water Council, New Hampshire/Vermont***

I like to add an episode of Everybody Loves Raymond where volunteerism was shown in a positive light. Only one example of that I can think of. Perhaps we should congratulate a producer when they get it right.

***Submitted on 5May03 by Margo Ashmore, Minnesota, USA***

In a recent episode of "American Dreams" the wife was recruited by her professor to sit at a table on a street corner registering black people to vote. I got the impression the woman was being portrayed as really having to get up the courage to do it, definitely thinking it's the right thing to do, perhaps doing it to impress the teacher.

In an episode of Cheers, Rebecca Howe thought volunteering would improve her chances of getting an award. We only hear her side of the phone conversation; she rolls her eyes and it goes something



like this, "don't give me anything depressing, and NO WEEKENDS!"

I agree that volunteering could benefit from product placement. Many stars who have adopted causes and diseases get on the talk shows to promote them. Maybe these same stars could be enlisted to urge writers and producers to use volunteering as story lines more often.

I don't watch TV or see movies anywhere near as much as the national average. During prime time, I'm often busy doing my volunteer work in civic engagement and economic development. Along those lines, it will be interesting to see if in this registry anyone mentions "fight city hall" stories.

***Submitted on 2May03 by Susan J. Ellis, President, Energize, Inc.***

Last night on "CSI," the crime scene investigators were tracking down information on a teen suicide. At the local high school, they spoke to a group of girls who were clearly supposed to be in vogue (sexy clothes, etc.), who told them to go talk to another girl. One said: "She's a 'volunteen' at the hospital." She rolled her eyes and put a snide emphasis on the word 'volunteen.' In the next scene, the investigators are walking down a hospital hall and wind up at the window of the pharmacy. There, seemingly all alone, was a Candy Striper - pinafore and all. She answered their questions, including whether or not she gave the dead girl any drugs. Her response: "No! And even if I wanted to, I couldn't." And she pointed up to a surveillance camera! (You figure out all the things that are wrong with this picture.)

***Submitted on 1May03 by Suellen Carlson, Director of Volunteers, Lutheran Social Services, New York State, USA***

The teenagers attending "Chilton" on "The Gilmore Girls", who hope to attend Ivy League Colleges, regularly speak of their volunteer activities which can make the difference between who gets into a prestigious college and who doesn't. Many of the teens who volunteer for me see their volunteer activities as making a difference in both their attempt to get jobs and their attempts to get into the college of their choice.

## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on May 25th, 2017*

*Karen Carson, Volunteer Coordinator, NJ State Library Talking Book & Braille Center, Trenton, New Jersey, United States*

Remember that old Seinfeld episode when Elaine, Jerry, and George decide that they've been selfish and need to volunteer? They are disappointed when an agency assigns them to visit seniors in their homes. Of course, Jerry and George are assigned to help a very cantankerous older man and Elaine is repelled by her senior's obvious facial deformity. The writers surprise us by turning the situation into a positive one when the older woman tells Elaine all about her sordid affair with Ghandi! Jerry and George are not so lucky, and volunteerism is not mentioned for the rest of that season.

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*Submitted on May 25th, 2017*

*Susan J Ellis, Energize, Inc., Philadelphia, PA, United States*

Excellent example of how volunteering is used in the media merely as a plot device and often for humor. Thanks for sharing, Karen!

-- Susan

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