

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Don't Let the History Made by Volunteers Fall through the Cracks of Time

Don't Let the History Made by Volunteers Fall through the Cracks of Time

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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A week ago I attended a fascinating lecture at historic [Laurel Hill Cemetery](#) in Philadelphia on "Legendary Civil War Ladies," all of whom are buried there. It was (as I anticipated) a 360-degree volunteer experience. The official description explains:

Join living historian, Kerry Bryan, in period attire as Elizabeth Hutter, Civil War nurse and founder of the Northern Home for Friendless Children. Through the lens of Hutter's own life story, learn about the struggles, accomplishments and tireless efforts of women during the Civil War era. From nursing the sick, to inventions that would aid the Union in warfare, to fundraising to clothe and feed its troops, the ladies of Laurel Hill served their nation in various ways.

For two hours we heard about a dozen women whose lasting contributions to social welfare were entirely done as volunteers. Told to us by a 2013 volunteer who is part of the Friends of Laurel Hill Cemetery, today's volunteers preserving this National Historic Landmark (even the cookies at the reception following the presentation were made by a volunteer, and they were yummy!).

It always saddens me how rarely the historic role of volunteers is acknowledged outside of occasional special lectures. When Katie Campbell and I wrote the first edition of [By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers](#) in 1978, we expressed this thought as the very first paragraph of the book (and it still opens the 3rd, 2005 edition):

We are usually taught the history of the United States as a succession of events, enacted by key individuals who emerged as leaders. Though it is always understood that such individuals represented thousands of other citizens, the focus and recognition have been on the president and the general, the mayor and the minister. This book 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.

All of this is further complicated by gender issues. Unfortunately, until late in the last century, women had very few options for civic participation except through voluntary social service. But it would be a mistake to assume that men did not also volunteer. Although men did many things without pay, their activities were most often called “public service,” “activism,” or “patriotism,” while only women bore the label of “volunteers.” Nevertheless, whether it was silversmith Paul Revere volunteering for that midnight ride or Samuel Gompers organizing the American Federation of Labor in 1881, most history was not made by anyone’s employees.

The results of collective volunteer efforts are all around us, but largely unrecognized. Just one example is reserved parking spots for disabled drivers. We now take accommodations for people with physical disabilities largely for granted, but all the parking spots, entrance ramps, chimes on elevators, and more exist today because of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act – which itself was the *end point* of a long crusade by countless volunteers. The Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund [tells that story](#).

Preserve and Showcase Volunteer Efforts Today

How can we prevent volunteer efforts from being forgotten? For the International Year of Volunteers in 2001, Energize challenged colleagues to celebrate volunteers today by showcasing them as the current step in a continuum of volunteer action from the past and therefore the next step to future service. We called the project “[Look Back to Look Ahead](#).” We’ve kept the area posted on our Web site and recommend the concept as an unusual and memorable way for you to celebrate the transition from the old to the new year.

It’s simple. Take a camera and perhaps some volunteers and step outside. Start taking snapshots of things that represent the forgotten efforts of volunteers in your own community. Then think about how you could develop a presentation to surprise and educate others. (All colleagues reading this Hot Topic, no matter where they are on the globe, will find amazing local examples of what people have done, voluntarily, together.)

Here’s an example of some slides I use in my own historical presentations, with some notes to you about what I might say when each is on the screen.

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It's also interesting to note that much of what you will find to photograph represents long-term commitment by dedicated volunteers. Given today's popular single days of service, you can make a statement about the results of "hanging in there." Of course, if your community boasts a playground built in a day as a group volunteer effort, add that picture to your slide show. Or before and after pictures of a stream clean up.

There are many intriguing variations on this theme. For example, you might concentrate on history that relates to your particular mission or cause: child welfare, cultural arts, environmentalism, whatever. Or you can take photographs *inside* your building of items that recall your organization's pioneers: the sign to the conference room that bears the founder's name; a piece of equipment bought through the fundraising efforts of an auxiliary; some historical documents such as your incorporation papers (bearing the signatures of the founding volunteers). You can see the possibilities.

Once you've looked back in time, take a look forward, as well. Use your new material in future volunteer training and recognition, in funding proposals, and other creative ways. Your DOVIA/professional association or volunteer center can collect several of these projects created by members and hold a public viewing or community-wide history event. Combat fleeting online messages and preserve your work in photo books with convenient printing services offered by many photo-sharing sites such as Flickr and SnapFish . Together we *can* prevent volunteers from being invisible or forgotten.

We Want to Help

There are more how-to ideas to discover and celebrate their volunteer roots in the tips section of the [History](#) topic in the A-Z Library.

If I've spurred you into photographic action, please share your creations with us and we'll create a central place anyone can come to discover volunteering history. Send us your photos with captions, slide shows that talk about the history these shots represent, or feel free to be a videographer instead and share your videos. This challenge is open to all leaders of volunteers around the world.

You can describe what you've done to look back (and ahead) in the response section below and/or send a photograph, slide show, or link to a video to webmaster@energizeinc.com. If you prefer, share it on the [Energize Facebook page](#). We'll make sure it gets posted properly.

We wish you a very happy holiday season and all the best for the new year!

Related Topics: [Motivation](#) | [Recognition](#) | [Recordkeeping and Reporting](#) | [History](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#)

Submitted on 17 December 2013 by A Neale, Australia

Thanks, I've found this really useful to read, and wasn't expecting to find anything so relevant to my situation! We are revising our organization's volunteer management strategy, and have tentatively chosen to have the role "Volunteer Leader" at the top of the hierarchy, managing sub-teams that each have a "Team Leader".

Submitted on 04 December 2013 by Brenda Greenberg, Director of Volunteer Services, Northern Services Group, Monsey, NY, USA

You are so right. Every community has so many areas of our lives that were either started or are continued because of volunteers. We need a reminder of this every once in a while.

Submitted on 02 December 2013 by Sue Hine, Wellington, New Zealand

Thank you Susan for reminding us so powerfully of the history of volunteer achievements. It's a shame we have to be reminded.

I think we are getting better (in New Zealand at least) at telling present day stories, without the platitudes like 'glue of society', 'backbone of the community'. Today I have read about recruiting young high school students to help a hospice, including patient and family contact. My community newspaper is reporting on medals awarded to 'local heroes' for their volunteer work, which did not happen within any major volunteer programme. And then I spot Gisborne Volunteer Centre on FaceBook telling me about all the volunteering that happened over one weekend.

These are Good News stories, a pleasing contrast to the woes of volunteer recruitment or lack of recognition for managers of volunteers. I would like to think a look back at history will help us rise to the challenges of 21st century volunteering and its management.

Submitted on 02 December 2013 by Susan, President, Energize, Inc., USA

Thanks to Rob Jackson for building on this Hot Top in his own December blog posting, "[Has the time finally come to stop talking about job substitution?](#)". Read his British perspective (to confirm that it isn't at all different!).

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