

VIEWPOINT



I'm a volunteer.
That makes me invisible,
right? Wrong!

by Lydia A. Berneski

In the autumn of 1970, one of the daily newspapers in my hometown of Buffalo, New York, featured a request for additional volunteers from the local chapter of the American Red Cross. As I had just lost my job because of a fund cutback at the school where I was teaching, I was happy to offer my services.

During the orientation program for new volunteers, we were told, apologetically, that we must provide our own uniforms. Also, it was suggested that we work about ten hours a month to maintain our status and to keep up with what was going on at the chapter. I then proceeded to put in sixty or more hours per month at the Delaware Avenue Headquarters for the next five years. Those were busy but satisfying hours, and I did everything from typing letters, reports and donor cards to filing those cards and correcting any errors to telephoning potential donors and screening the many people who walked in to give blood. I traveled with the mobile blood unit to sites around the city and microfilmed thousands of cards. Ten times, when it was needed and when it was not, I donated a pint of my own fresh, young blood, type AB positive. In all this time, there was no monetary compensation, not even a dime toward bus fare—nor did I expect it. I know that my time at the chapter was essential to the blood donor program. I performed many, many jobs absolutely necessary to keep this important program operating. But at the same time, I was very much aware that I was gaining valuable skills from my volunteer experience which I considered an investment in my future. I thought that all I had done at the Red Cross would be ample proof to any prospective employer that I would be a desirable employee.

But when I moved to New York City and applied at an employment agency for a job, the interviewer flatly refused to contact the firm with the most attractive job, which required only one year of office experience. She told me that five years at the Red Cross didn't count and that my teaching experience was too far behind me to count, either. Her exact words—"I'll never forget them—were, "They wouldn't want to be bothered with someone like you!" Although I tried to explain how vital my daily presence had been (What if I had overlooked a mistake in a blood type on one of the records?), it was no use: She said I had better just wise up to the fact that volunteer work didn't have any clout. The experience left me fuming, and I wrote a seething letter to the director of the employment office, but I still didn't get the job I wanted.

I have been volunteering ever since I became the singing instructor at a Ukrainian summer camp. I didn't receive a salary but I had the benefit of the camp

itself and I spent many hours teaching and singing with eight- to ten-year-old campers. No one can deny that these summers also contributed to my own maturity—and to my musical training and my interest in becoming a teacher as well.

When an organization called the Neighborhood Information Center opened down the street from me, I became one of its first steady volunteers. The Center's clients received free information on possible housing, job openings, emergency food supplies, assistance with educational difficulties and referrals for home repairs and other tasks. My fluency in several languages came in very handy at the Center, and it was always a pleasure to see the relief spread across someone's face when they discovered that I spoke their language—here was someone who could *really* help.

Additional volunteer hours have been spent at Roswell Park Memorial Institute, a well-known cancer research hospital in Buffalo. Such hospitals are always in need of volunteers and it is demanding and challenging work to deal with cancer patients undergoing treatment.

Today, I am a volunteer counselor with emotionally disturbed teenagers at the Learning Laboratory at the State University at Buffalo. I am proud of my work. It matters. So why is it—and why am I—taken so lightly? When I tell people what I do, they react favorably. But when they find out that it is on a volunteer basis, they invariably say, "Oh, you're *just* a volunteer."

Must a person receive a salary before her work can have meaning in today's society? I have given my time as a volunteer as a free choice. I am not a martyr, nor do I expect overblown recognition for my work. All I ask, for myself and for the millions of other volunteers across the country, is respect for what we are doing and the recognition that our experiences are just as valid and important as those from a paid job. That seems perfectly reasonable. But how do I make it happen?

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