

Submission to the PAVine, 4/13/93

"Global Issues of Volunteerism"

Susan J. Ellis, President
ENERGIZE, Inc.

In September 1992 I was privileged to be the opening keynote speaker at the First European Conference on Volunteerism held in The Netherlands. It was sponsored by Volonteurope, an official organization funded by the European Commission to identify and bring together people throughout Europe who share an interest in strengthening volunteering. There were 130 participants in the conference, from 15 countries. Although the European nations have vastly different cultures and service delivery systems, all have long traditions of some form of volunteering. But not all countries have what we would consider to be "organized volunteering." Much of the conference was spent exploring the possibilities.

The following are excerpts from my keynote address. I think these questions have relevance to everyone in PAV, too.

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Europe is presently undergoing massive change in almost every aspect of social and economic life. It would be presumptive of me to try to offer predictions or solutions, but I would like to share some of the questions that are in my mind as I come to this conference. Perhaps these will evoke other questions from you and we can grapple with these issues during our time together.

- o How can volunteers go beyond political and national boundaries to find mutual solutions for mutual problems facing us all, such as AIDS, pollution, or crime?
- o How do we find a legitimate balance between "professionalizing" the "management" of volunteers while still maintaining the unique "amateur" (for the love of something) quality of volunteering?
- o How can we find and use the commonalities between the two major components of the volunteer world: the agency-related volunteer program and the all-volunteer association?
- o How will volunteering stand up to the animosity of trade unions? We actually can have the shared goal of 100% employment and 100% volunteering.

- o What role will volunteering play in dealing with aging? As seniors begin to be seen as three sub-groups (the young elderly, the middle elderly, and the oldest elderly), how will we accommodate volunteer roles? How can we take the leadership in deploying the talents of senior volunteers as well as in providing services to older people through volunteers?
- o How can we strengthen Volunteer Centers/Bureaus to do the job we need them to do?
- o Can volunteering again be a vehicle for elevating women, rather than be rejected by women as undervalued labor? Historically, in the United States volunteering gave women a voice they could get no other way. Might this still be a field in which women can rise to the top? But at the same time, how do we equalize the gender roles?
- o What role can volunteers play in helping the citizens of the European Communities break down the lingering mistrust and intercultural prejudices of centuries of tradition?
- o As immigration and racial diversity increase throughout Europe, can volunteers help break down discrimination barriers, too?
- o How can societies that relied primarily on the state for services re-discover the value of participative democracy and the role of citizen involvement in service delivery? This includes volunteers in government services, too.
- o As the world grows smaller, how will the tradition of European and American volunteering be received by Africa and Asia--and what will we learn in return about how those continents deal with social problems?
- o How do we agree on and then teach others a common vocabulary for what volunteering is and does?

In our daily work, leaders of volunteers are often isolated. Alone we can do little, together we can do so much more. We need one another and networks such as Volonteurope or the Association for Volunteer Administration (AVA). When we come together in conferences such as this one, we must share how we do things as well as "what" it is we do.

Finally, we also have to be concerned with political action as well as with direct service. Volunteers rarely speak for themselves. As leaders of volunteers we must be clear on what volunteers need in order to be most effective and then we need to advocate for that in an articulate way--to make volunteering visible and on the agenda!

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There will be a second annual Volonteurope conference this year on October 1-3 in Belgium. By the way, you may be interested in knowing that the subject our European colleagues most wanted to talk about last year in The Netherlands was volunteer/staff relations! See, the world really is small.

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