

COMMUNICATIONS WORKSHOP

The Mass Media Image of Volunteers

By Susan J. Ellis

OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS, I HAVE HAD OCCASION to approach the news media. Sometimes I wanted coverage of a volunteer-related event. Sometimes I hoped for aid in recruiting new volunteers. Sometimes I wanted recogni-



Edith Bunker (Jean Stapleton) offers a sympathetic ear to a dying nursing home patient (Angela Clarke) on "All in the Family." At right, an incredulous Archie (Carroll O'Connor) wonders how Edith could be fired from her volunteer job.

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tion of the many achievements of volunteers past and present.

Whenever I do get on the air or am interviewed, the reporter invariably says, "Gee, this is really interesting. I'm surprised." I'm also used to being told that many of the things I considered "human interest" were not "news." But I will never grow accustomed to the phrase thrown at me no less than three times in the past six months alone: "Volunteering just isn't sexy."

How did we get to such a state of affairs where volunteering can be so pervasive, yet so invisible? Maybe it's because when volunteers are mentioned, especially fictionally, they are often portrayed in a poor light. A sixty-second Comet cleanser commercial, for example, portrays a woman wearing a Candy Striper uniform. She has just arrived home. "Hello, dear," her mother greets her, "how was your volunteer job at the hospital today?" Our volunteer beams and says, "Just wonderful—I learned so much."

Then, the winsome lass goes on to say, "I had a long talk with the hospital housekeeper and she told me all about Comet cleanser." The next scene is a flashback to the hospital housekeeper standing by a cart loaded with Comet. This dissolves to the volunteer and her mother in their bathroom, gaily affirming that from now on Comet is the cleanser for them.

After this Comet commercial was aired, a friend of mine who is a hospital director of volunteers had at least three high school applicants ask if they had to clean bathrooms when they became Candy Strippers!

"All in the Family" provides another example of the negative image of volunteers on television. For several seasons, Edith Bunker was an ongoing volunteer

in a local nursing home. Though some might well take exception to the stereotypical portrayal of older people in these episodes, our interest here is the volunteer aspect. Edith spent many happy hours at the home, finding satisfaction and self-worth. In fact, during her brief separation from Archie, she gathered strength and identity from her nursing home responsibilities.

All this changed early last season in an episode revolving around a dying patient. Edith is assigned (by a nondescript staff member) to sit with this patient and "do whatever she asks." The woman, simply and eloquently, asks for Edith to hold her hand. Edith, of course, complies, and the woman dies peacefully.

In the next scene, Edith is summoned by the nursing home director to his office where, in the presence of the late patient's hysterical daughter, she is fired summarily from her volunteer job because she did not call for staff help. Devastated, she returns home and Archie is incredulous that a volunteer could be fired.

Later in the episode, the bereaved family visits Edith and patches things up with her. Since then, however, Edith has never returned to her volunteer position.

There are other examples of stereotyping volunteers, especially on television. Several old "I Love Lucy" episodes, which many stations currently are rerunning, deal with Lucy's "Women's Volunteer Fire Company." Her volunteers spend more time matching fingernail polish to the color of the fire engine than helping their communities.

In an episode of the "Mary Tyler Moore Show" (also enjoying the popularity of reruns), Mary decides at breakfast that she wants to become a Big Sister. By lunchtime she is matched with a streetwise, shoplifting teenager. Mary establishes such rapport with her Little Sister that by the last scene she has convinced the girl to return some newly stolen items to the store with an apology.

Mary's astounding success is balanced by rival Sue Ann, who, not to be outdone, gets herself matched to a black Little Sister, then begins sporting an afro-style haircut. After that episode, we never again hear of either Mary's or Sue Ann's commitment to be volunteers.

My favorite in the show "Family" is Buddy, the self-sufficient teenage daughter. When the TV Guide noted that one week's segment last fall would con-

cern Buddy's hospital volunteer work, I naturally made it a point to tune in. And there was Buddy, spilling water all over the hospital hall, dropping two dozen rolls of toilet paper on her head in the supply closet, and sitting on the bed of a young male patient.

Turning to a similarly uniformed friend, Buddy says, "Just our luck to join a sorority where they make you do volunteer work." This is her first line in the show. The real story plot turned out



"Family's" Buddy—Kristy McNichol

to be Buddy's infatuation with the young male patient.

The movies often project a similarly negative image of volunteers. If you saw the acclaimed "Coming Home," you'll remember that in the first five minutes, the character Jane Fonda plays decides to become a volunteer at the veterans hospital to fill in her lonely days while her husband is off at war. In the very next frame, she is wearing her pink smock and wandering down the corridor. Apparently assignment-less, she is not being much help to anyone. The movie soon leaves the hospital, and so does this military wife's commitment to volunteering.

On the other side of the coin, the mass media does present a positive side to

volunteering, though sometimes subconsciously. On election night, for example, most candidates picked up by television cameras express public appreciation for the efforts of all the volunteers that enabled them to get so far.

In fiction, an example of "good" volunteerism was shown in "The Last Giraffe," a made-for-television movie. Here, a humanitarian couple is trying to save a threatened herd of giraffes in Africa and their plea for help turns up hundreds of volunteers ready to guide the herd to a sanctuary.

In the soap opera "Another World," a character volunteers at the local hospital while trying to sort out her life following a series of mishaps. In one episode, she is asked out on a date but declines because she is scheduled to volunteer that night. Her commitment bears unexpected fruit as she discovers a love of medicine. She is presently in nursing school.

The only example of a continuous, positive approach to the naturalness of volunteering comes from "Little House on the Prairie." In this top-rated show, hardly an episode goes by without someone doing some form of unsalaried community service. We've seen school board meetings, church committees, midwifery, nursing during epidemics, repairing houses and barns, donations for the blind school. Though the perspective is historic and never labeled "volunteering," that is exactly what it is.

Volunteerism suffers daily by its public image—or lack of it. The attitude that it is "dying," or is a thing of historical, rather than current, interest we know is untrue. If the mass media is perpetuating invalid volunteer stereotypes, then we volunteer leaders should do something about it.

We must raise our consciousness to recognize when and how volunteers are being presented. If we see a positive presentation of volunteers on television, we can write in praising the show. If we see volunteers presented in a negative light, we can register our complaints. We can encourage our volunteers to write in, too. Together, we can make a difference.

(Editor's note: If you see a movie or TV show depicting volunteers in either a good or bad light, tell us about it. If you find a cartoon, article, ad or poster portraying volunteers in a similar way, send it to us. We'll print your "image" examples in a future issue of VAL.)