

# VOLUNTEER!

**It can change the world—and your life ●**

**E**very Wednesday, Alicia Wolfington, a blonde, elegantly dressed woman, recruits one of her five children or a friend to accompany her as she serves Meals on Wheels to homebound elderly men and women. Maggie O'Neill, a program planner with the Maryland Department of Education, finishes a day at the office and heads directly for the Maryland Food Committee to plan a public relations campaign about hunger in Maryland. Sally Michel, a community activist, takes two hours each week to mentor a young woman from a tough inner-city neighborhood.

These women are part of a growing number of Americans who

BY KATHLEEN KENNEDY TOWNSEND

**IN AMERICA, MORE THAN 600,000 PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS...27 MIL. ION**



have decided to take the country's swelling social problems into their own hands and try to make them better. Between 1987 and 1989, the number of people who volunteer grew by 23 percent; today, 98 million Americans are donating time to charitable causes, according to a Gallup Poll commissioned in 1990 by Independent Sector, a national forum that encourages giving and volunteering. And much of this growth—about 25 percent—has come from the ranks of the much-maligned yuppie generation.

Still, our nation's needs are immense. Legions of people are sick with cancer, diabetes, AIDS. Families suffer from poverty, hunger, homelessness. Our cultural and educational institutions languish with insufficient support. Volunteering alone can't possibly solve all of these problems, but it is a critical first step. For example, while volunteering will not bring adequate health care to the 37 million Americans who have none, it can free up other resources and make them available to help ease the health-care crisis. All it takes is about five hours a week of your time.

#### Where to begin

One of the biggest obstacles to volunteering is figuring out how to do it. How do you find the right organization? How do you find the time? What are you committing to? Are you the right kind of person to be a volunteer?

For some people the answers come serendipitously. Terry Morgenthaler, a paid associate development director for a local theater in Washington, D.C., hadn't thought much about volunteering. Then one day in 1988, she was pitching an event at the theater and found herself being pitched right back by a group that helps abused children. She wound up with two tickets to an event honoring the organization's volunteers. "I dreaded going," she says. "But I did go, and when I listened to what the children

had been through and how the volunteers had helped, I was utterly moved. Tears were streaming down my face. It was an extraordinary experience." Today, she is the chairperson of the organization's board.

Most people, however, should be much more systematic in making their decision. Use the following guidelines as a good starting point. And remember: You don't have to be a Mother Teresa to be a volunteer. There is no reason why the experience shouldn't enhance your life in practical as well as spiritual ways. You can make new friends, learn new skills, even beef up your résumé. The people who benefit don't really care why you're doing it. They just need your help.

#### How close do you want to get to the action?

The first step is to understand exactly what kinds of tasks you might be asked to do. There are three levels at which you can volunteer:

*Direct service* encompasses those projects that directly help another person: mentoring, tutoring, visiting the elderly, serving food at a soup kitchen. These jobs can offer immediate satisfaction because you are interacting one-on-one with people in need.

*Indirect service* includes fund-raising and environmental projects. There's lots of teamwork, and it's a good way to meet other volunteers, but these are more issue- than people-oriented kinds of tasks. When you're garnering support for whales or the rain forest you're not likely to see the real fruits of your labors.

*Advocacy* includes consciousness raising, lobbying and public relations campaigning. If indirect service is one step removed from the final goal, advocacy is ten steps away. It usually requires a long-term commitment and can be fraught with disappointment. Months of lobbying Congress for family counseling funds, for instance, can be rendered worthless in one round

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**Some of the faces of volunteerism (left to right): working at a soup kitchen; mentor Sally Michel visiting an art gallery with Fatima Miller; Kathleen Townsend spilling up the playground at a public school.**

**MILION ADULTS ARE FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE. YOU COULD HELP THEM.**



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of balloting. But when a hard-fought-for goal is finally achieved, the rewards are great.

## Finding the perfect fit

Once you've decided on the kind of work you want to do, pick an organization and a schedule that fit into your life. Don't take on more than you can deliver. If a volunteer project interferes with your family or your job or your financial security, you won't stick with it over the long haul.

Helen Lambertson, a retired psychologist, volunteers at a particular museum because it is within walking distance of her home, which saves her the expense of gas and parking. Alicia Wolfington abandoned her attempt to work as a tutor when she learned that the only opportunities were in the ghetto. She felt it was too dangerous to walk through a bad neighborhood in the evening. "I didn't want to put myself or my five children at risk," she says. Nor should she have to: Volunteering needn't be a sacrifice. Making your contribution more difficult doesn't make it more meaningful.

You should also feel comfortable evaluating how effectively an organization uses its volunteers before you sign on. Just because a group is nonprofit doesn't mean it's okay for it to be mismanaged. Wolfington likes working with Meals on Wheels precisely because everything is so well planned. "Not only do they supply very clear directions to the addresses where the deliveries are to be made," she says, "but every stop also has a card with instructions on what to do when you get there. For instance, on one of my routes there is a blind person, and I was told to place her food on the table and direct her hands to the plate so she would know it was there."

If the work you do as a volunteer is good for your career as well as your spirit, more power to you. Enlightened self-interest fuels many successful volunteer endeavors. One young advertising account manager who agreed to chair her local United Way's Communication Committee—a job that involved convincing other advertising agencies to donate their creative skills to that organization's ad campaign—found the experience extremely useful professionally. "I made a lot of new contacts," she says. The fact that her volunteer work enhanced her reputation among her peers doesn't diminish the value of the contribution she made to the United Way.

## Just do it

No one would disagree that the crunch of our daily lives sometimes makes it hard to do anything for anyone else. But the benefits of volunteering are simply too good to pass up. It's easier than you think to find out where you're needed. Ask a friend. Go to your local hospital or your local school. Better yet, go across town.

As a nation, we've become increasingly isolated in our neighborhoods and workplaces. We live, play and work with people who look like us, who shop at the same stores, who eat the same kinds of food, who enjoy the same types of recreation. Volunteerism offers us a chance to break free from that isolation—to know a different America, to help a different America, to help ourselves.

# JUST DO IT

For those who wish to be a part of the growing minority of dedicated volunteers in this country, we have compiled a list of six diverse national organizations that can be contacted for their local affiliates.

## American Cancer Society

1599 Clifton Rd., NE, Atlanta, GA 30329

**What it does** As the largest private source of cancer research funds to date, the ACS offers programs for cancer research, education, patient service and rehabilitation and sponsors many patient and family support groups. Many local units provide equipment and supplies to make home care as comfortable as possible.

**What you can do** Almost anything, including driving patients to treatment centers, offering information, counseling and support to families of the patients, educating the public about the signs of cancer and what can be done to prevent it.

**Where to start** To contact the ACS in your area, look in your White Pages or call 800-227-2345.

## American Social Health Association/National AIDS Hotline

Box 13827, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709

**What it does** ASHA provides information about AIDS/STDS and can put you in touch with an organization in your community that is in need of your help in combating the AIDS crisis.

**What you can do** By calling the hot line you can access information on numerous programs, including local support groups, church centers, hospitals and community centers. You might get involved by working for a food-delivery organization or home-care service, answering a local hot line, counseling or helping out in your local pediatric AIDS clinic. The jobs will vary depending on local needs.

**Where to start** Contact the AIDS Hotline information specialists at 800-342-AIDS.

## Habitat for Humanity International

121 Habitat St., Americus, GA 31709

**What it does** This is a hands-on organization that uses volunteers to build homes for families who normally wouldn't be able to afford one. To qualify for a home, a family must put in an average of five hundred hours of "sweat equity" working on a Habitat house—theirs or someone else's. Since 1976, 3,995 new houses or rehabs have been completed in the U.S. and Canada. The average monthly payment, including taxes, insurance and a no-interest 15-to-25-year mortgage was \$176 in 1990.

**What you can do** You don't have to be a professional builder or electrician or plumber. Every job is important, from hammering nails or planting shrubs to providing refreshments or raising funds.

**Where to start:** To find out about the 1,500 homes now being planned for 1992, contact the Human Resources Department/Volunteer Recruiter at the international offices, 912-924-6935.

## Literacy Volunteers of America Inc.

5795 Widewaters Pkwy., Syracuse, NY 13214-1846

**What it does** This group has trained more than fifty thousand volunteers to tutor adults who have poor reading, writing or conversational English skills.

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## Just do it

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Tutors are carefully matched with students to make learning easier.

**What you can do** First you have to go through an eighteen-hour training program, after which you will be expected to tutor for two hours per week. Volunteers are also needed in organizational, administrative and fund-raising capacities.

**Where to start** Contact the national volunteer hot line at 800-228-8813.

### **National Audubon Society**

950 Third Ave., New York, NY 10022

**What it does** Not just for the birds, this conservation group has been in existence since 1905. It has more than five hundred chapters and is dedicated to helping and protecting all wildlife, natural habitats and the environment. It manages and protects eighty wilderness areas throughout the U.S.

**What you can do** Volunteers are needed to monitor acid rain, save wetlands, help with recycling programs and teach Audubon educational programs at local elementary schools.

**Where to start** Call the national office at 212-546-9100.

### **Special Olympics International**

1350 New York Ave., NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20005

**What it does** Special Olympics sponsors year-round sports training and athletic competition for 750,000 individuals with mental retardation worldwide, both children and adults. The Olympic-style events provide participants with not only new skills, but also a sense of accomplishment—not to mention a world of new friends.

**What you can do** There's something for almost everyone. You can coach or organize or manage or officiate or just "hug." There are more than a half million volunteers already involved, and still more are needed.

**Where to start** Check your local phone book; or contact the international headquarters at 202-628-3630.

## Point of light

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forced into early retirement. Ethan, the student, had volunteered because he was too young to hold a real job. For all practical purposes we were a group of under-employed men who were working for free or, rather, for the simple pleasure of being occupied. In fact, national trends show an increase in the number of men and young people who volunteer. Almost as many men now volunteer as women.

The area around the construction site looked desolate, as if the mainstream of life had simply passed it by. Habitat for Humanity believes it can help stabilize the neighborhood and prevent it from becoming more run-down and hopeless by building these houses and selling them at a cost that four carefully selected families—two white and two black—can afford.

After I had been working a while, I began to feel the first intimations of "helper's calm," that subtly euphoric state that is to the Nineties what sexual afterglow was to the Seventies and runner's high was to the Eighties. I had read all the stories about how doing good for others would dramatically increase my life expectancy and vitality, and now my endorphins (those opiates for all seasons) were kicking in. Like the millions of new volunteers across the country, I was getting high on doing good.

As the afternoon wore on, I couldn't help but notice a group of young men hanging out in front of an old apartment building across the street where, according to our project foreman Paul Farrell, the residents dealt in prostitution and illegal drugs. We volunteers were getting so much satisfaction out of working, I thought it was a shame there aren't more programs capable of training and employing the alienated and perennially unemployed, a task that volunteer agencies simply aren't equipped to do.

### **Big shoulders, big problems**

Habitat was the only truly successful experience I had in San Francisco. Most of the organizations I approached were eager for publicity

but otherwise had no use for me. I began to think that I simply hadn't been emphatic enough about what I was after. Chicago had to be better. I had spoken to Donna Dixon, a coordinator at The Volunteer Network, who said that she and her coworkers placed one thousand volunteers a year. Surely she'd be able to find work for me.

If my troubles in San Francisco had given me reason to be skeptical about volunteer organizations, Dixon made it clear how flaky we volunteers could look from their point of view. She and her colleagues try to match volunteers' skills and interests with an organization's needs, but volunteering, like all things, often succumbs to what is trendy. "For a while we were swamped with people who wanted to work with cocaine babies," says Dixon, "so the hospital has a year's waiting list for those volunteers.

"And there are those who are not willing to go where the need is," she says. "I was working with some women who wanted to volunteer at a shelter, but they wanted to do it in a nice neighborhood. I told them, 'I'm sorry, but I can't find you a shelter in Oak Brook.'"

Even when an organization does get the volunteers and the project together, there's no guarantee of success. For my first assignment, Dixon set me up with a group of teenagers to clean up a backyard for a woman who had been confined to a wheelchair for forty-six years. When I arrived, two women from Chicago's Department on Aging were standing in front of the house looking distressed. They said that the backyard was more of a project than anyone had anticipated, and the teenagers had already left. While they discussed the need for heavy equipment and the possibility of snakes, Dixon and I inspected what appeared to be a forty-six-year-old thicket of weeds and brush that had grown up behind the house. The cleanup would eventually get done, but not today.

My afternoon assignment was much more fruitful. I was to help serve dinner at the Olive Branch, one of the oldest men's shelters in Chicago and a main stop on "tramp trail," the route the men take as they go from shelter to shelter