

Silver Reflections

Miriam Karlins

How do I feel about being here today?
Let me count the ways.

1. Grateful for being present and sharing this special anniversary year with you.
2. Honored to have received the Lifetime Award last year and to have been invited to speak today.
3. Thrilled to see old friends and make new ones.
4. Proud over the accomplishments of AVA.
5. Pleased to be able to share a bit of history and project a bit into the future.
6. Frustrated because of the limited time I have to say all I want to say.

Last year I was so filled with emotion at receiving my Award and listening to the very kind things Laura Lee Geraghty said about me that you who were present witnessed a miracle: I couldn't speak. This year your planning committee, in its infinite wisdom, told me that I could say anything I cared to about the past, present or future, as long as I kept it brief.

Preparing for this talk provided me a wonderful opportunity to "walk down memory lane" as I glanced through old files and tried to decide what to include in my remarks and what to omit. (Cutting 25 years down to a 10 or 15 minute presentation ain't easy.) As I re-read the letters, minutes, agendas and recommendations I was reminded of the many wonderful people I was privileged to work with. We owe them our gratitude for their vision and leadership—the same kind of vision and leadership that has been consistent over the years and has been responsible for the continued growth and success of our organization and its members.

Now for a recap of our history. It all started in 1951. Our initial focus was on

volunteer services in large state mental hospitals which, in the early 1950s was a very new, untried field for volunteer involvement. And we were fortunate in obtaining the professional support of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), whose members were extremely cooperative and helpful in providing meeting space and publicizing our meetings in their regular mailings. At that time I was the only person in the country to be hired by a state agency to establish a state-wide volunteer services program for state hospitals serving mentally ill and mentally retarded persons. I contacted other states asking if they had any information they could share with me. The few who took the time to reply indicated that they had no such on-going programs and several asked me to share whatever information I was able to gather with them.

Fortunately, in 1954 the APA Mental Hospital Institute was held in Minneapolis, and I was asked to handle the local arrangements in cooperation with the APA office. It turned out to be a most fortuitous assignment because I observed that other related professional groups such as nurses, business managers, recreational therapists, etc, were holding meetings of their own a day or two prior to the Mental Hospital Institute. Recognizing the advantages of such an arrangement, I contacted the APA staff and asked if volunteer service coordinators, too, might be included in the "pre-Institute" groups. They agreed and were most cooperative, providing us with many services free of charge.

In Kansas City, October 1958, as a result of a letter sent to the state mental health authorities, volunteer services representatives from 12 states met together for the first time to exchange ideas, present

Miriam Karlins was the first president of AVA (then known as AAVSC as she explains in this presentation) and has devoted her extensive and varied career to serving the field of volunteerism. This speech was a 25-year retrospective presented at the AVA Awards Luncheon in Buffalo.

programs and discuss mutual problems and objectives. All agreed it was a most worthwhile experience and asked that another meeting be scheduled again in the fall of 1959, preceding the Mental Hospital Institute in Buffalo, N.Y.

The second meeting took place in Buffalo, October 18 & 19, just 27 years ago and in this same city in which we are meeting today. There were 55 people in attendance, representing 18 states. In addition to the volunteer services coordinators (as they were then called) there were representatives from other disciplines such as medicine, nursing, social services and from the National Association of Mental Health, National Red Cross and American Hospital Association. Topics discussed by these five groups included: the hospital and volunteers; administrative procedures; training; awards and recognition; and policies. Also discussed were community relations and educational programs involving volunteers.

At the conclusion of the Buffalo meeting there was strong support for meeting annually and much discussion took place regarding what the objectives of such meetings should be. Even at that early stage of development, it was recognized that there could be a danger of becoming too "inbred" and speaking only to ourselves. One recommendation was that the present planning committee be expanded to cover geographical areas which would allow for greater regional participation. That was the beginning of the development of AVA's regional groups.

The next meeting was scheduled to be held in Salt Lake City in October, 1960, at which time the group officially organized as the American Association of Volunteer Service Coordinators (AAVSC).

At Salt Lake City our main concern was simply to determine how we could best help our members do a better job, knowing that by developing their skills we would ultimately be more effective in helping patients and the programs and facilities we served. This concern led the organization to charge its officers and board to explore ways in which standards could be developed. Things have a way of happening simultaneously! While we were considering the development of standards, the Council of State Govern-

ments wrote to us asking if we could supply information regarding salaries, duties, job requirements and a number of other factors related to the position of Volunteer Services Coordinator.

One of the difficulties we encountered was that the position itself was really in the process of development and each state and facility had its own requirements. Some counted students as volunteers, some did not, some counted once-a-year groups, some did not. There was no agreement as to whether a regularly assigned volunteer worked once a month, once a week, daily or several times a year. At the same time that the questionnaire went out to obtain the information requested by the Council of State Government, we applied to the National Institute of Mental Health for funds to hold a national conference for the purpose of developing standards and training. The NIMH entered into a contract with AAVSC and a national conference was held in Washington, D.C. in August, 1963. The content and recommendations of that conference are as valid today as they were 23 years ago.

In 1974 we broke away from the APA in order to expand membership to include those from areas other than mental hospitals. Also in 1974 the word "salaried" was eliminated as a requirement for active membership.

Throughout the early years we were able to be flexible and open-minded, willing to recognize when to move into new phases and when old standards or language or practices were no longer valid. Of such stuff was AVA made. Our attitude towards professionalism was much like that expressed by Flexner regarding the field of social work: "After all what matters most is a professional spirit."

Years ago in an article relating to the profession of Librarianship, one author stated that although librarians could be considered in an occupation on its way to becoming an organized profession, his concern was more in terms of improving services. If this eventually brought recognition as a profession, all well and good. I believe he expressed our sentiments because we, too, are primarily concerned with improving services and part of our

success is due to our ability, over the years, to keep our eyes on our mission and relate our activities to its fulfillment.

Too many facilities, groups and organizations start out with noble ideas and excellent missions, but somehow in the process the ideas get lost and the organization, the profession or the agency itself becomes the reason for being. At that point the struggle for turf and power interferes with accomplishing the real purpose for which they were organized. Thank goodness, such has not been the case with AVA.

Before leaving history, let me recount hurriedly some of the early concerns and considerations we addressed.

- Gaining staff acceptance
- Whether a college degree should be required for the position of Volunteer Coordinator
- Whether members should be salaried
- To whom the Volunteer Coordinator should be responsible
- Records and forms
- Hospital volunteers and hospital auxiliary
- Recruitment and retention of volunteers
- Volunteer training and orientation
- Staff training and orientation
- Insurance
- Definition of a volunteer
- Development of a mission statement
- Development of a code of ethics
- Benefits of membership
- Type, location and method of training programs

Included in the mistakes we made were:

- Imposing volunteers in organizations without adequate staff participation
- Not including staff efforts in volunteer recognition
- Over-orienting volunteers
- Allowing volunteer coordinators and their offices to become catch-alls for duties not related to volunteer services.

All of the above concerns and problems were under consideration before 1965. In the 25 years since we became an Association we have made great progress: cer-

tification, college courses and credit for volunteer work by businesses and colleges, and becoming a recognized and respected profession.

And now just a few words about the future. Our Sunday night speaker in a most delightful and yet serious manner made us all keenly aware that, not only are significant changes occurring, but they are occurring at an accelerated pace. Volunteer services, like many other traditions, will be affected by these changes. Many knowledgeable persons tell us that we have moved from an agrarian to an industrialized society, and now to one in which communications and human services will play (and, indeed, are already playing) increasingly important roles in the future.

However, in our ever-changing, fast moving society, some things remain constant and the need for interested, involved citizens in our society is one of those constants. In an article entitled "The Volunteer In Our Society" the author states:

Civilization apparently is of such a nature that the further we progress in it, the more difficult we find it to live together. As our society grows ever more complicated and impersonal, the need for voluntary work becomes daily greater, for it is essential that there be preserved a balance between complexity and conscience. Contributions made by individuals and groups voluntarily is the real foundation of a democratic society and it is one of the ways in which, in spite of mechanization and automation, we remain human.

For Volunteer Administrators the future may present many new challenges and many new opportunities and we will need to stretch beyond our present horizons to become aware of them. There is still the danger of becoming "inbred" and we must never allow that to happen. We must continue to be aware that it is the client, the patient, the student, the resident, the inmate, the person with problems, the community needs, the betterment of conditions, services and programs which are the reasons for which volunteer services and programs are developed. But we must never forget that our primary responsibility is to the volunteer.

The future will present some new and difficult decisions for us to make. If volunteers are to be trained as change agents and advocates, it will require different expectations, approaches and training than that which has been developed for the more "directed, compliant" volunteer. Government and bureaucracies have a way of not only refusing to recognize or acknowledge mistakes, but of reinforcing them to prove they're not wrong. Volunteers working with governmental or any other type of agency, be it private or public, have the opportunity through their involvement to recognize problems, to objectively assess what is happening and to question what is taking place. Such questioning may cause resentment and defensiveness, but may also produce accountability and even bring about appropriate change. What all of this means is that volunteers will increasingly recognize opportunities for leadership roles which may require them to be risk-takers.

Let's continue to work together and with others without unnecessary concerns for territory, labels, prestige and other foolishness which get in the way of getting the job done. It's amazing how much can be accomplished when there is no concern for who gets the credit.

Certainly the volunteer administrators of today feel more secure in their identity and positions. However, I sense that there is still a need for greater assertiveness and increased participation in the administrative and decision-making processes within the agencies and organizations in which we work. We need to know what is going on and why if we are going to involve the larger community in our programs. I often wonder if we fully recognize the tremendous potentials of our jobs and how far reaching our influence can be through our tremendous citizen resources. We are in a position to influence public understanding and gather public support through the active participation of volunteers in our various programs and services.

Education and training may provide us with knowledge and skill development but only each one of us, as individuals, can determine how that knowledge and those skills will be utilized. Your programs will be what you make them and I am

confident that you will successfully meet whatever challenges there may be in the future—just as you have in the past.

My best wishes go with you—along with my thanks for inviting me to share these thoughts with you on this special occasion.