

**Erna Bombeck**

# Say thanks before all the volunteers stop trying

Volunteers are like yachts.

No matter where they are, they arouse your curiosity. Who are they? Where do they come from? Why are they here?

They could stay moored where it's safe and still justify their being, but they choose to out through the rough waters, ride out storms and take chances.

They have style. They're fiercely independent. If you have to ask how much they cost, you can't afford them.

Volunteers and yachts have a lot more in common these days. They're both a part of an aristocratic era that is disappearing from the American scene. They're both a luxury in a world that has become very practical.

**DAY BY DAY**, the number of volunteers decreases in this country as more and more of them equate their worth in terms of dollars and cents.

Three years ago I did a column on volun-

teers in an effort to point out that they don't contribute to our civilization. They are civilization -- at least the only part worth talking about.

They are the only human beings on the face of this earth who reflect this nation's compassion, unselfishness, caring, patience, need and just plain loving one another. Their very presence transcends politics, religion, ethnic background, marital status, sexism, even smokers vs. nonsmokers.

**MAYBE**, like the yacht, the volunteer was a luxury. And luxuries are too often taken for granted.

One has to wonder. Did we, as a nation, remember to say to the volunteers, "Thank you for our symphony hall. Thank you for the six dialysis machines. Thank you for sitting up with a 16-year-old who was doped and begged to die. Thank you for the hot chocolate at the scout meeting. Thanks for reading to the blind. Thanks for using your station wagon to transport a group of

strangers to a ballgame. Thanks for knocking on doors in the rain. Thanks for hugging the winners of the Special Olympics. Thanks for pushing the wheelchair into the sun. Thanks for being."

Did the media stand behind them when they needed a boost? Did the professionals make it a point to tell them they did a good job? Did the recipients of their time and talent ever express their gratitude?

It frightens me, somehow, to imagine what the world will be like without them.



By **ERMA BOMBECK:**

## The gift of giving is society's treasure

I had a dream the other night that every volunteer in this country, disillusioned with the lack of compassion, had set sail for another country.

As I stood smiling on the pier, I shouted, "Goodby, creamed chicken. Goodby, phone committees. So long, Disease of the Month. No more saving old egg cartons. No more getting out the vote. Au revoir, playground duty, bake sales and three-hour meetings."

As the boat got smaller and they could no longer hear my shouts, I reflected, "Serve them right. A bunch of yes people. All they had to do was to put their tongue firmly against the roof of their mouth and make an O sound. Mmmmmmmmmmm. Nmmmmmmmmmm. Nmm. No! No! It would certainly have spared them a lot of grief. Oh well, who needs them?"

The hospital was quiet. I passed if rooms were devoid of books, flowers and voices. The children's wing had no downs

... no laughter. The reception desk was vacant.

The Home for the Aged was like a tomb. The blind listened for a voice that never came. The infirm were imprisoned by wheels on a chair that never moved. Food grew cold on trays that would never reach the mouths of the hungry.

All the social agencies had closed their doors, unable to implement their programs of scouting, recreation, drug control, Big Sisters, Big Brothers, YW, YM, the retarded, the crippled, the lame, and the abandoned.

The health agencies had a sign in the window. "CURES FOR CANCER, MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY, BIRTH DEFECTS, MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS, EM-PHYSEMA, SICKLE CELL ANEMIA, KIDNEY DISORDERS, HEART DISEASES, ETC. HAVE BEEN CANCELLED

DUE TO LACK OF INTEREST."

The schools were strangely quiet with no field trips, no volunteer aids on the playground or in the classrooms... as were the colleges where scholarships and financial support were no more.

The flowers on church altars withered and died. Children in day nurseries lifted their arms but there was no one to hold them in love. Alcoholics cried out in despair, but no one answered and the poor had no recourse for health care or legal aid.

But the saddest part of the journey was the symphony hall, which was dark and would remain that way. So were the museums that had been built and stocked by volunteers with the art treasures of our times.

I fought in my sleep to regain a glimpse of the ship of volunteers just one more time. It was to be my last glimpse of civilization... as we were regaining

# Volunteers have made marks throughout history

To my knowledge, no one has ever researched the history of volunteerism.

Was the battle at Little Big Horn a group of fathers and sons attending a Scout camporee that got out of hand?

Was some poor mother volunteered by her kid to bring the potato salad for 500 for the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth Rock?

I suspect we will never know for sure, but of one thing I'm certain. Volunteerism prepares you for greatness.

Leafing through the pages of history, you can almost read between the lines. Take Sadie Orchard. Do you think her becoming the first woman to drive a stagecoach in 1880 in the Wild West was by accident? Get hold of yourself. This woman had been a veteran of five years of stagecoach pooling, hauling kids around from one outpost to another for everything you can think of from kicking-the-can Little Leagues to intramural barrel races. History reports she carried a bullwhip. Don't we all.

And what about Rebecca M. Winbourne, who was known as the Betsy Ross of the Confederacy for making a flag that was adopted by the Confederate Congress in 1861?

Women don't go around making flags for a hobby. I smell a committee here who needed a woman to make a flag out of old dyed flour sacks in less than two weeks. They picked on poor Rebecca who had come to their first meeting . . . as a guest.

And what mother who ever suffered through merit badges has not wept for

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Evelyn Cheeseman, who traveled alone among cannibals in the South Pacific in 1881, and collected more than 42,000 insects and parasitic worms.

Recognition for volunteers even existed at the turn of the century, but what's the use if you don't get the media out? Therefore on Oct. 24, 1901, I suspect some health organization sent Annie Edson Taylor over Niagara Falls in a barrel. The trip took 35 minutes and got her on the wire services, along with the cause.

And who could forget Josephine Schauer Blatt of New Jersey, who is credited with making the greatest lift ever made by a woman — 3,564 pounds. And why not? Only a year before on a field trip with 35 preschoolers on a picnic, she picked up a carriage and threatened them with walking back to town if they didn't shape up.

The volunteer is a species that has endured in America. I do not presume to suggest what their epitaph will be.

But Katharine Elisabeth Goethe's is as good as any: "Say that Frau Goethe is unable to come, she is busy dying at the moment."

*Erma Bombeck writes for Field Syndicate. Her column appears in the Sunday News Journal and Wednesday and Thursday in Pace.*

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## The 'rich old ladies' we couldn't do without

When they are spoken of, they're referred to as "social do-gooders" or the "rich old ladies of causes" or "members of the ball-of-the-month club."

You've all seen them on society pages in their rustling suedes handing a check over to someone at a luncheon where crab quiche is being served and champagne flows.

They're harmless. They keep busy. They bother no one.

They bother me. Too long I've sat by and marveled at their low profile, their disciplined drive and their awesome contribution to this country without saying a word.

Without any fanfare whatsoever, these women (who don't have to do anything) have silently built museums, sustained operas, fed the poor, funded shelters, erected hospitals, created parks, effected cures for diseases, raised money for research,

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provided schools and scholarships, perpetuated the arts and brought dignity and opportunity to people they will never see, to lives they could never imagine.

In Dayton, Ohio, the art in the Dayton Art Institute was in danger, thanks to a leaky roof. The building was not accessible to the handicapped. Mrs. Frederick C. Smith (Pfeife) and her committee raised more than \$1.8 million.

In Baltimore, the Women's Board

of Johns Hopkins Hospital has raised \$3 million over the last 10 years for the benefit of the hospital. In Chicago, while 25 debutantes danced, the Women's Board of the Northwestern Memorial Hospitals wound up their drive for \$2.8 million for the purchase of a magnetic resonance X-ray machine. In San Diego, Calif., the Jewel Ball again raised more than \$125,000 for service projects. In Cleveland, fund-raiser Jeannie Jones said the women suffer from "benefititis" but \$7 million was raised for the orchestra in that city.

This isn't even the tip of the iceberg for all the fund-raising that is going on all over the country by these women. What makes them unique is how they do it. Most of them cut their teeth on money-making projects such as brownie sales, church bazaars and car washes, but as the needs became greater they

grew into a good ol' girls network. Their fund-raising is a lot of begging, a lot of unreturned phone calls, a lot of trade-offs and arm-twisting for donations and patrons.

But God love 'em, they pull it off. I have spoken at benefits in towns so small you could carpet them for under \$36. Miraculously, when the curtain opened, there were 2,500 people in black ties and gowns who paid a ridiculous amount of money for the privilege of dressing up formally on a Tuesday night.

The "rich old ladies" (most of them are not that old) have had their place in the sun. They'll fade into oblivion. But when you're saying your prayers tonight, offer up one for these "social do-gooders" and be glad they have a social conscience to go with it. I wouldn't want to know what this country would be without them.

# It's great to be a volunteer — sure it is

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Looking through the pages of history, you can almost read between the lines: "Yes, little Orin, do you think you could contribute a woman to the cause?" "No, no, no, in the 19th century, we can't do that." Or volunteer, that woman had been a

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veteran of five years of stagecoach-ooling, hauling kids around from one outpost to another for everything you can think of from kick-the-can Little Leagues to intramural bare-reeades. History reports she carried a bullwhip. Don't we all.

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# Once a volunteer, always a volunteer

The anatomy of a volunteer who was asked to fill a table of eight for a style show benefiting needy children:

**Monday:** Called Jeanette. Jeanette bought a ticket and in turn sold me two tickets for a gymnastic exhibition to send six baton twirlers to the inaugural.

**Tuesday:** Saw Marge in supermarket. Marge bought a ticket and sold me two tickets to a ball to fund "Save the Whale Sperm." Gave me 60 flyers to distribute for a race to be run a week from Sunday to Stamp Out Puberty Among Our Young People.

**Tuesday night:** At the tennis match, met Nancy who bought a ticket and in turn sold me 10 chances on a pony and enlisted me to sell peanut brittle to benefit restoration of an 1890 brothel that was being torn down to build a 1960 brothel.

**Thursday morning:** Sold two tickets to Elaine who sold me a cookbook and two tickets to a luncheon with proceeds going to a Home for Retired Girl Scout Cookie Chairmen.

**Thursday afternoon:** Called Marty and sold her a ticket. Marty, in return, asked me to make a table decoration for a luncheon and solicit

a Weight Watchers scholarship as a door prize. The luncheon would benefit a Shotmobile that would administer flu shots to the elderly.

**Thursday evening:** Saw Mayva. She bought a box of peanut brittle and sold me a ticket to a house tour benefiting Misplaced Homemakers. She was sorry she couldn't attend my style show but signed me up to drive a group of Women in Crisis Over Night Driving to a concert Friday night.

**Friday:** Saw Helen selling fruitcakes in a supermarket to buy a camper for the nuns at the school. She reminded me that when she bought a ticket from me last year for the Sponsor-a-Tree picnic, I told her I would collect door-to-door for Foot Health Week coming up next month.

**Friday afternoon:** Heard Marsha just got home from the hospital and wanted to get to her before anyone else. Sold her two tickets to the style show, but not before she made me promise to serve as chairman of the next year's Devotion to Motherhood and Wine-Tasting Seminar.

**Saturday morning:** Georgia finally returned my call. Before I could make my pitch, she asked me to fill a table of eight for a style show benefiting needy children.

Is there no compassion left for a volunteer suffering from Terminal Weakness?

*Erma Bombeck*

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