

## ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors briefly summarize the key elements of Robert Putnam's intriguingly titled book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. A scholarly work on the nature and changes in voluntary association in America over the last several decades, *Bowling Alone* concludes that new kinds of voluntary association are needed in the 21st century to create social capital. Whether the reader agrees or disagrees with Putnam's analysis, opening a dialogue on new ways of thinking about voluntary association is instructive to managers of volunteers. What kinds of associations are needed? Are new tools for creating and measuring social capital required? The authors say "yes" to both questions and offer a close-up look at the work of the award winning All Stars Project, which has broken significant ground in building voluntary association — a "tool and result" activist community.

## The Art of Community Building in Light of Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone"

Gail Elberg and Janet Phillips

*Bowling Alone*, subtitled *The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, is a scholarly work full of insights about the social and cultural habits of Americans in the second half of the twentieth century. In this intriguingly titled book, Robert Putnam asserts that membership in local voluntary associations which burgeoned in the 1940s and 1950s has been in steady decline since the mid-1960s. Contributions of time and energy we once made to local voluntary associations have become instead contributions that are primarily monetary, made to national-scale organizations that act on our behalf.

Americans these days, Putnam says, are not enrolling in Parent Teachers Associations (PTAs), not becoming members of unions, not joining professional, sports, or veterans groups, and not subscribing to the activities of organized religion. He accounts for this decline by a variety of societal changes, including more women in the work force, greater residential

instability, fewer marriages, more divorces, lower birth rates, lower real wages, and the technological transformation of leisure (more time spent with TV, VCRs, and computers).

Putnam distinguishes between a social being and a member of an organization, and drives home his point with an analysis of the pastime of bowling. While the number of bowlers has increased, the number of bowling leagues and membership in them, he says, is in decline. Rather than people belonging to a bowling organization, which brings them together to regularly bowl with the same individuals, they bowl "alone." That is not to say that they bowl by themselves — rather, he says, they bowl with friends, family, or people brought together just for the occasion. The key difference is that they do not join together, act as a group, and have an organization which represents their bowling interests.

Voluntary association implies member-

---

*Gail Elberg* is the Director of Volunteer Programs at the award winning All Stars Project, Inc. in NYC which she helped to found thirty years ago. She received a BA in Psychology from Brooklyn College and served in VISTA. Gail was the chief organizer of a 10,000-member welfare rights union and a consultant to non-government funded community-based organizations nationally. Last year the organization won first place in the MONY competition for best volunteer site for working people. She is on the Board of Directors of NY AVA and Co-chairs its Professional Development Committee.

*Janet Phillips* holds a BA in Economics from Brandeis University and an MA and PhD in anthropology from Cornell University. Over the years, she has worked in the areas of economics, research, community mental health, fundraising, and market research here as well as overseas. Janet Phillips has been an All Stars volunteer for one year, involved in public relations, grant writing, and incentive awards. Prior to this, she volunteered at The Fortune Society in New York, a non-profit community-based organization dedicated to educating the public about criminal justice issues. She is a long-term, less-than-active member of the PTA.

ship and means individuals come together at regular intervals. Obligation arises from joining, and fraternity and collegiality are offered.

A voluntary association, a community, a society—all produce social capital which becomes the glue holding the association, community, or society together. In his article, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," which preceded his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Putnam says "'social capital' refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." Social capital benefits the larger community, the organization served by the various individuals' efforts, but it also has a personal good, benefiting the individual by the social ties he or she forms and sustains in the process.

Putnam tells us that, typically, people who are more social — that is, those who join fraternal, professional, or special interest organizations — are also those more likely to become volunteers. In his book, he says "Altruism, volunteering, and philanthropy—our readiness to help others — is by some interpretations a central measure of social capital." Like members of voluntary associations, volunteers contribute their time, work on behalf of the organization without financial remuneration, and believe in the sanctity of the organization's work.

Interestingly enough, Putnam reports a steady increase in volunteerism over the same twenty-five year period in which he shows overall declining membership in civic, religious, fraternal, and union-type organizations.

He explains these conflicting trends through delving into the current ranks of volunteers and finds "virtually the entire increase is concentrated among people aged sixty and over." So while volunteerism is on the increase, it is overwhelmingly due to the large numbers of senior volunteers, the sector most invested in being civically engaged. Recruit-

ment to such physically demanding forms of volunteering, as volunteer firefighting, is down because such volunteering doesn't fall into the category of work able to be done by seniors. In addition, the primary channels of volunteer recruitment—religious and civic associations—are disappearing. In all this, the only promise Putnam sees is a new spirit of volunteerism developing in the millennial generation but he senses the gap is too large for them alone to be able to fill. So, "the growth of volunteering in recent years is real, but not really an exception to the broader generational decline in social capital."

From all indications Putnam feels there is a clear need for new ways of creating social capital. He himself seeks these out but admits that solutions for reinstating civil society, that is, creating social capital, and "ensure[ing] that by 2010 the level of civic engagement among Americans then coming of age in all parts of our society will match that of their grandparents when they were that same age" are scant, short of a palpable national crisis.

"Is erosion of social capital an ineluctable consequence of modernity, or can we do something about it?" Putnam asks. We (the authors) believe the answer does not lie in "reconnecting," "restoring," "renewing," "rebuilding," or "returning" in the twenty-first century to institutions specific to a different era.

Rather we see the need for new kinds of organizations that may serve the altered and specific needs of twenty-first century life. In merging the analytical tools of the social scientist with the pragmatism of the activist, we have come upon solutions that Putnam perhaps could not imagine from his vantage point in academia.

A look at the All Stars Project suggests what voluntary associations for the twenty-first century might look like. They would break free of the concept of membership organizations as we currently know it and identify a new paradigm — community. By that we mean a fluid group of people, hundreds of thousands

of people, that is constantly re-shaping itself.

The history of the All Stars Project provides a unique example of this kind of community building. Begun thirty years ago by Fred Newman, a Stanford University-trained philosopher and activist, the All Stars comprised a small group of educators, psychologists and community organizers. Our goal was to learn the kinds of environments that needed to be built for human development to take place. We wanted to create organizations, programs and activities not overly determined by the conventions of traditional institutions. As a result, we did not accept government funding, did not get tied into the political infrastructure, and committed ourselves to being shaped by the needs of the community. We adopted a strategy of reaching out to all classes, ethnic backgrounds, and ages, giving anyone interested the opportunity to participate. Our vision was social transformation. Our task was to discover how human development could be reinitiated in devastated as well as middle-class communities.

From grassroots organizing in New York's poorest neighborhoods to street tabling (soliciting support from passers-by) in middle-class communities, over the three decades of social experimentation, the methods used by the All Stars Project have produced institutions and programs as diverse as alternative schools and anti-brutality committees. Dr. Lenora Fulani, an African American developmental psychologist and independent activist, plays a leading role in guiding our youth work. Our chief aim is to create community that is both inclusive and flexible, responding to the ever-changing needs of the community that we are. In our view, such a community, organized and perpetuated by volunteers, including the staff, which for decades were themselves volunteers, exemplifies a new kind of social capital.

At present, our development community includes the All Stars Talent Show Network, the Development School for

Youth, and the Castillo Theater. These institutions are located in a broader international community of therapeutic and cultural institutions. The Daily Points of Light Award presented to us this year recognized the Horatio Alger nature of our efforts, coming from nothing and through determination, grassroots organizing, and a groundbreaking methodology becoming a success. In the fall of 2001, the All Stars Project will relocate, enlarging its base of operations from a loft space to a 30,000-square-foot performing arts centre located in Midtown New York City.

The All Stars Talent Show Network involves over 20,000 young African-American and Latino children from working-class and poor families in inner city areas.

These programs operate in New York and Newark with a satellite program in Atlanta, areas where violence and crime claim their victims at a very young age. The youth come together to learn to produce and perform in neighborhood talent shows.

The Development School for Youth works with high school students. In each of the last four years, it has introduced seventy-five high school age students in New York and Newark to the corporate world through workshops, as well as paid summer internships in corporate settings.

And lastly, Castillo Theater is our off Broadway theater situated in New York City's Soho community. For the past eighteen years, it has been producing entertaining and socially relevant productions.

The model we have developed for creating community is that of the dynamic interaction of donors, volunteers, and youth working towards common goals. Everyone at the All Stars Program is a donor, everyone is a recipient: youth, volunteers, and financial contributors. We do not have clients nor do we serve the poor. Rather we are activist, undefined, and fluid.

In asking All Stars' volunteers if they consider themselves members of an orga-

nization in Putnam's terms, they might very well say no. And this would be because the All Stars is a community without borders. Since no one is rejected, the traditional concept of membership where some people are "in" and some "out" does not prevail, which means our volunteers don't identify themselves as "members" per se. But in our view, their voluntarily associating with a community striving to create a world of racial harmony, democracy, and development is most definitely creating social capital.

If we accept the traditional dichotomy of donor and needy, we are back in Putnam's universe where social capital is a losing cause. But in radically rejecting the assignment of such labels as "giver" and "recipient," and relating to everyone as a giver, we build community. In this way, we avoid pigeonholing people and making assumptions that sabotage their growth. An example of breaking free of these standard definitions emerged in the course of a clothing drive we held last year. Inner city youth collected clothing within their own community to send overseas. This activity helped to counter the hurtful myth that inner city youth have nothing to give.

We further build community by offering volunteers the choice between jobs that have been defined in advance and jobs created to suit their interests. After attending a two-session training program, new volunteers make their interests known. At the same time, we present our needs, and a work plan evolves as well as the possibility of new job descriptions.

We create community with our All Stars talent shows. For each audition, workshop, and show which takes place in inner city high schools in New York City, we sponsor a "Back to School" trip. On such occasions, donors travel in All Stars buses to inner city locations and participate as enthusiastic audience members and as part of our congratulations chorus. In these ways, donors are encouraging talent show participants.

In this way, All Stars creates communi-

ty through the activity of people giving to support the social vision of this newly evolving community. This fluidity differs from Putnam's "joining," where rules define membership and where members may never participate beyond the act of joining.

People are part of the community by what they give — attending events, selling raffles, reading an article about All Stars and passing it along to a friend — and not by the act of taking out a membership.

Seventy-five volunteers staff the auditions, workshops, and shows in the high schools and form an intrinsic element of our talent show performance. While we could likely manage with half this number, having such a diverse staff, from high school students to well-to-do adults, helps create the community in which the talent show succeeds.

Volunteers attend weekly play readings. Here they read scripts aloud sent to us by new playwrights from around the world seeking feedback on their writing. While such volunteer activities are not jobs in the traditional sense, they are community-building events that accomplish needed work.

Everyone wanting to volunteer at the All Stars Project is accepted. And as a human development center, we prioritize the development of our volunteers. Our concern is as much — or more — with what we can do for the volunteers as with what the volunteers can offer us. Informed by the teachings of Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist, (as discussed in *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist* by Fred Newman and Lois Holzman) our volunteer program is not tool for result but rather tool and result. That is to say, the development of the volunteers is as intrinsic a measure of the success of the All Stars Project as the development of the organization by the volunteers.

In conclusion, we offer the All Stars community as a new way to consider building social capital and voluntary association. An organization founded by

volunteers and now staffed by former volunteers and an organization that grew independent of traditional funding sources, the All Stars Project, we believe, breaks new ground for volunteerism for the twenty-first century. Predicated on the desire of Americans to build a better world, our mission is nothing less than social transformation. With this as our goal, everyone is needed.

---

#### REFERENCES

- Newman, Fred and Lois Holzman (1992). *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist*. New York City, NY & London, England: Routledge.
- Putnam, Robert D. (1995). Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy*, (January), 65-78.
- Putnam, Robert D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York City, NY: Simon and Schuster.