

# Pausing at the Millennium — Reflections of a Veteran Volunteer Administrator

Jarene Frances Lee

As the millennium draws to a close, my mind is filled with memories of my 30 years in the field of volunteer administration; and, at the same time, in looking ahead I am filled with excitement about what lies before us.

When I began my career in 1968 it was, as it was for so many others, an accident. I did not grow up wanting to be a volunteer administrator. And yet, within my first few months as the director of volunteer services at Trenton (NJ) Psychiatric Hospital fresh out of graduate school I knew I had found my field. It was hardly a field then, however. Harriet Naylor's book — the first in the field — had been on the market only a year; AVA existed but it had a different name, a narrower focus and a tiny membership.

Over the years, many things have happened that now justify calling our line of work a field (but hardly a profession): AVA's competency-based certification program, the huge number of books on the market for us, the availability of good training and some college-level courses, to name a few. Yet I believe we are still "a discipline in diapers, an unknown breed," as I wrote in an article published in *Voluntary Action Leadership* in 1977.

Why is this? Could part of the answer lie in our inability to connect what we do — what our unique expertise is — with the positive trends and also the growing needs of the society around us? In other words, have we been so bound up with how to do our jobs that we have not stopped to reflect on why our jobs exist at all?

Put simply, I believe that we are to be, first and foremost, advocates for volunteerism. The voluntary spirit that Ellis and Noyes chronicled in *By the People: The History of Americans as Volunteers* is vitally important in a democratic society. It is the source of virtually all good ideas, the springboard for efforts to preserve our culture, as well as efforts to change it (resulting in some conflict, of course). Whether formalized or spontaneous, volunteerism is indispensable to a civic society.

If we see ourselves as advocates for volunteerism then we are in a position to interpret the positive trends and the growing needs in the society around us. We can rejoice over the fact that volunteerism is "in." The promotion it is receiving from schools, corporate boardrooms, government policy is unprecedented! And we should stand ready to mobilize the new volunteers who respond to this promotion. That means being proactive, not reactive. It also means speaking out knowledgeably but not defensively when volunteers are touted as the sole solution to "pressing social problems." Yes, volunteers can play vital roles in addressing social problems but not without the training, support and coordination of their work that we are accustomed to providing. Yet where in all the hoopla of the President's Summit did you hear mention of the need for more volunteer administrators?

If volunteers are indispensable, then we are indispensable, too! So what attributes do we have that have stood the test of time? What attributes must we pass on to

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those who will succeed us in the twenty-first century? There are many, but I would like to mention five. First, every outstanding volunteer administrator I know (and I'm proud to say I know many) is a positive person. We have a spirit of optimism, a can-do attitude, a certain vibrancy that, I believe, comes from working with volunteers. Second, we have a remarkable ability to do seventeen things at once while neither sweating nor swearing. Can that be said of even the world's finest brain surgeon? Third, we are intuitive; we see in people gifts and strengths that even they didn't know they have and we know how to fit those gifts with the needs of the organizations we serve. Fourth, we are not shy. We can ask anybody to do anything. Partly it's because we believe in (I sure hope!) the cause we're associated with; and partly it's because we know about the special joy that one experiences when one helps. And fifth, we are affirming. We are not afraid to tell people (and not just those who are volunteers) that they ... did a great job ... are a lifesaver ... are a joy to work with ... make a difference ... We are, in fact, so good at affirming, that we can do what some find unthinkable: fire a volunteer. If the volunteer administrators of the next millennium do not have these five attributes then they will have become too "professional!"

So the greatest challenge that our field will face in 2010 can be avoided if we face it now: promoting our legitimacy. Even here in New York City, there are too many agencies, including large and reputable ones, that pay their volunteer administrators terribly. Others do not recognize them as equivalent to department heads and bury them on the organizational chart and/or load them up with other unrelated responsibilities. Still others fail to provide for paid assistants and a larger budget as the size of the volunteer program grows. The mistaken notion is that volunteers are free. We will help our own case if we continuously reminded ourselves that it is essential to be thoroughly grounded in our field.

AVA's big challenge is to continue to pull us together. It is regrettable that our unwieldy regional structure was not modified in time to let AVA be the international catalyst for the creation of local DOVIAs. My dream is that every volunteer administrator will someday see AVA membership as indispensable. If that does not happen soon then AVA will lose ground in a field that it helped to shape no more than 30 short years ago.

AVA membership has been indispensable to my career. In the '70s I attended workshops at AVA conferences conducted by such greats as Harriet Naylor, Ivan Scheier, Eva Schindler-Rainman and Marlene Wilson. I have read everything they wrote, such was their importance to my professional development. AVA continued to feed my need for growth by ensuring that other great trainers spoke at the conferences in the '80s and '90s: Sarah Jane Rehnborg, Rick Lynch, Sue Mallory, Steve McCurley, Sue Vineyard, Susan Ellis, Linda Graff, Betty Stallings and others. AVA is also a link to peers around the country and abroad as well. The great danger in this field is the sense of isolation that comes with being the only one of a kind in one's organization. To have colleagues a phone call away with whom I can commiserate and collaborate is vital. Finally, AVA gave me an opportunity to shape the field by allowing me to serve in a number of leadership positions nationally and locally over the years.

Even though I believe we are still "a discipline in diapers, an unknown breed" I cannot think of another field I'd rather be in. My role now as a trainer, consultant and writer gives me the opportunity to share with others younger than I what I learned from those older (or more experienced) than I. Our willingness to help one another is one of the finest characteristics of volunteer administrators. May that still be so when we are well into the the next millennium.