

Wing With Volunteer Administration For The New Century!

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The First AVA Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Volunteer Administration

On the occasion of the first AVA Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Volunteer Management, it is with sincere personal and professional joy that I share with you, my professional colleagues, first, some of my thoughts and observations about the field of volunteerism and secondly, some of the challenges that face us. It is a wonderful field in which to devote our energies. Over the course of many years in work with volunteer groups across the globe, I have been privileged to watch — with wonderment and amazement — the growth and maturing of this profession, a profession of which — each of you — has played and is playing an integral part.

As we enjoy our participation in this conference here, in Busan, Korea, it is important that we remind ourselves that we represent but a few of the thousands of managers of volunteers worldwide. We have counterparts everywhere, managers of volunteers who share our vision and our frustrations, and are visible evidence of the extraordinary growth of volunteerism.

I can remember when the popular view of volunteerism was almost synonymous with “good people doing good things” in hospitals and other welfare agencies. I can remember when it meant the Red Cross and Scouts; when it was thought to happen only in the industrialized countries where individuals — primarily middle-aged, older women — could combine leisure time and a certain

degree of financial security and do nice things for people less fortunate than themselves. Of course, we know that is not the picture of volunteerism today, and I doubt that it ever really was.

Of one thing we are sure. The volunteerism we are looking at in this conference has a very different profile. It occurs across all economic levels, gender, age, and interest differences. No longer the instrument of service for solely non-governmental organizations, we find it alive and active in all kinds of organizations, both profit and non-profit, as well as at every level of government and in every imaginable public institution. Indeed, in every aspect of our social structures.

The growth surge of volunteerism worldwide is phenomenal. This surge is particularly evident in Eastern Europe and Asia. The first Volunteer Center in Moscow began functioning in 1996. Today, there are over 50 such centers throughout Russia, which, by the way, has a registry of over 300,000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Yugoslavia opened its first Volunteer Center in 1998, less than 4 years ago. Today, there are 9 others centers working with the 25,000 NGOs registered in Belgrade, encouraging them to integrate volunteers into their activities and training them for success in their efforts. These are just two examples. I could have used numerous other examples from Poland or Mongolia or Estonia. Yes, even Korea.

Dr. Arlene Schindler is well known for her involvement in the expansion of volunteerism in the United States and Canada and the development of volunteer programs internationally, specifically in Africa, Latin America and Europe. She served as Associate Director of Peace Corps in Africa; Executive Director of Women in Community Services, Inc.; Vice President for Prison Fellowship; Director of Volunteer Services for Special Olympics; and Director of Training of the National Center for Volunteer Action (now the Points of Light Foundation).

The proliferation of countries with active volunteer programs, and the speed of the growth and expansion of these programs should be evident even to those who are not paying attention.

Equally evident — as reinforced by a simple glance around this hall — is the fact that volunteering is an activity neither originating nor limited to any specific part of the world. We, here, give testimony to the truth that volunteerism is today, and always has been, a universal human activity.

Wherever and whenever human beings have organized themselves into social groups, volunteering has been there. Even the most casual overview shows us that neither wealth nor excess time are prerequisites for volunteering. They may help, but they certainly are not prerequisites.

And now, with the assistance of shared technology, instant and universal communication — not to mention the ease and speed of worldwide travel — we have a wealth of current information about what is happening even in the remote corners of the world. We can see the evidence and consequence of volunteer participation, we can talk with our colleagues daily, sometimes hourly, we can read our own professional journals and visit each other's web pages.

Some time back in his book "Bowling Alone" Robert Putnam, a professor of Public Policy at Harvard presented a rather discouraging picture of the American social scene. He showed how Americans were becoming increasingly disconnected and how social structures — whether they be the Parent Teachers Association, the church or political parties — have disintegrated. I challenge that observation. I believe that the face of civic participation has changed, as have the issues, the activities, and the structures in which individuals involve themselves. I think these are so dramatically different as compared to what we measured just a few years back, that former measurements are no longer valid. In fact, if we could get a truly accurate measure of the activities and impact of volunteers, we

would be stunned at the magnitude of their efforts worldwide.

The real challenge is to find the valid measure. It is true that many of the traditional institutions have seen a decline in volunteer participation. That does not mean that volunteers are not as numerous nor as involved as before. It simply means that they are now involved in different things and with different groups, and sometimes we have not been correct in interpreting what it is we actually are seeing.

Critical observation shows us that the environments in which today's volunteers work vary greatly from country to country — from city to city — from project to project. The structures that have been created by each society, and even by communities within society, to enable citizen participation are often singularly unique, as are the activities undertaken to achieve program goals.

Without exception, individual societies everywhere are defining the nature of their own problems. Citizens are responding with their own appropriate solutions. They are determining how best to deal with their social inequities; they are determining what are the requirements for the advancement of their art and humanities; they are addressing issues of aging, sports and recreation, and the environment; they are devising ways to involve disparate groups, especially the excluded and disenfranchised.

Do these objectives and activities sound familiar? Of course they do, because they are the same for volunteer communities everywhere. The issues are the same. The ways in which programs are structured and the activities undertaken within these programs may be different. Sometimes we cannot see beyond the "difference" to recognize the "sameness."

No matter where volunteers offer their talents, they are engaged in essentially the same things — tending to social, health and welfare needs, enhancing the quality of life, promoting civic responsibility, and facilitating citizen participation in all sectors of society.

Tending to social, health and welfare needs:

One common volunteer program is providing meals for the homebound. In the United States, Canada and elsewhere, this program is usually designed for meals to be prepared in a common facility and delivered to the clients by volunteers. In some places, in several countries in Eastern Europe, for instance, the meals are actually prepared in the homes of the clients by the volunteers, who not only prepare the meals but also join in the eating of them, while sharing an hour of socialization and good conversation. The activity is slightly different, but the intent is the same.

Enhancing the quality of life:

Another common western-world program is one in which volunteers remove graffiti from the public walls and buildings. In Yugoslavia, I met a group of delightful high school students who described themselves to me as the "Graffiti Volunteers" "Oh, isn't that wonderful!" I exclaimed. "You are the ones who remove the graffiti from the walls and fences." You can imagine my surprise when they quickly answered, "No we are the ones who put it on!"

Hiding my shock and investigating further, I discovered that their program and the ones I was familiar with, had, of course, the same intent. Some of us made the city scene more beautiful by ERASING the graffiti. These young volunteers made their city more beautiful by COVERING UP the negative or obscene scribbling of gangs with professionally designed murals. Often, the painters of these glorious murals were the same irresponsible youths who had put the "unwanted graffiti" there in the first place. Recruited by the Graffiti Volunteers, these young people were learning a lot of new lessons. They were experiencing a totally new understanding of "group activity" and civic responsibility.

The intent of the "graffiti volunteers" in each culture is the same, even if the activity is slightly different.

Volunteers in some parts of the world

work with animal shelters in programs designed to help children be responsible caretakers of their pets. Children are taught how to interact with animals for the well being of both. In northern Siberia, volunteers work with school children to teach them how to protect themselves on the way to and from school from wild dogs that roam the tundra during the long dark days of winter. **Same intent, decidedly different activity.**

We, in this room, are the managers and leaders of these myriads of programs and the plethora of activities they evoke. In the worldwide expression of volunteerism, you are determining where the efforts of your organizations are needed, defining the roles of the volunteers, and writing their position descriptions. You are identifying where specific talent and skills can be found so that recruitment efforts can be as successful as possible, you are orienting and training volunteers and staff to work compatibly and productively as a unified team, and you are rewarding individuals and groups who support your programs.

And those whom you recognize and cooperate with come from all segments of your communities. Not only from that group we once called "the volunteer sector." They come from NGOs of every ilk and issue; from government units and political personage. They include every professional, technical and educational field; they come from multi-million dollar corporations and business and religious groups.

Yes, we are doing the same organizational and managerial tasks everywhere. But we are shaping them into appropriate activities that recognize and respond to the uniqueness of our individual cultures and societies. And the reward of such conferences as this is that they provide an opportunity to observe, discuss, question and analyze programs with similar objectives with our colleagues — to copy the ones that fit and modify those which hold promise.

When I think about the difference in the

degree to which this field is now recognized as compared to even 15 years ago, I am awed. It is as if a new and powerful world subculture has come into existence, a subculture of volunteerism with its own language, its own activities, its own ethics, its own style, and its own expectation for professional and personal behavior.

Each of us has experienced a time when we traveled to some new and strange place. We remember how lost we felt. We couldn't read the menus, we couldn't ask directions, and we couldn't do the simplest things. Then suddenly — at a table near us in a restaurant, or on the bus or train — we heard it! Someone speaking our language! Those of us who were shy, simply took comfort in hearing that which was familiar to us. We relaxed in that wonderful moment of security and belonging. The bolder ones probably actually made ourselves known to our countrymen and even today, recall with fondness the conversations we understood with all their subtleties, and the laughter we shared over things that to anyone else wouldn't have been the least bit funny!

So it is that in our common effort to empower and mobilize individuals to responsible participation in their communities, we have created a new subculture — a subculture of volunteerism. I can go anywhere in the world and find my volunteer kinfolk — the members of this new subculture — the subculture we helped create and to which we belong. Instantly, wherever there are volunteers, you feel it — the camaraderie, the kinship, the solidarity of people with kindred spirit. You **SPEAK** the language of volunteerism. You **DO** the same things in your managerial positions. You **SHARE** the same problems and the same aspirations for success. You've experienced this already in this conference.

I urge us here today to recognize and operate within the extraordinary power and potential influence of this subculture to which we belong. It was Victor Hugo who

said, "There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world, and that is an idea whose time has come." Our time has come.

There is no arena — be it health, welfare, arts, sports, humanities, politics, peace, environment, religion — in which the culture of volunteerism is not an active and impactful force.

But now, having said that, what does that mean for us as professionals?

What does this mean for us as leaders in this emerged and finally recognized sector of the world community?

As organizers of voluntary effort, it means we have an awesome responsibility, but an even greater opportunity, to impact our world in ways heretofore never even imagined. It means, however, that if we are to fulfill our leadership roles we must:

First of all, be informed **beyond** our field. We must know what has happened and what is happening not only here in Korea, but also in Canada, in Mexico, in Zimbabwe, and in Indonesia. And we must be informed **not only in the field of volunteerism**, but in economics, trade, medical advances, and social issues. We, who provide opportunities for citizens to participate in the shaping of their societies, must — **above all** — be informed about emerging issues, about trends, about what is happening next door as well as what is happening at home. We must be informed beyond our field of volunteerism.

Secondly, we must be trained and skilled, not only by attending conferences such as this, but also by broadening our own personal experiences; continuing with our education, becoming volunteers ourselves, understanding and taking advantage of the progress being made in compatible fields. For instance, determining what is the latest thinking in organizational development, what are the new insights in management, in the required attributes of leadership? And then, we must integrate the best of these into our personal management and leadership practices.

Thirdly, being a professional in today's

field of volunteerism means examining our personal and professional values and becoming familiar with ourselves and who we are and what we believe. It means taking our **examined selves** with us to our places of employment so that our professional decisions and our leadership are consistent with our personal ethics and values. It means helping the organization with which we are affiliated discover its own principles and procedures that guide it in the fulfillment of its mission with consistency, predictability and transparency.

Fourthly, it means we must speak out and make our voices heard. We must move our ideas, our perspectives, and our influence beyond the walls of our workplace into the broader society. We must become active in the decision-making bodies of our communities at all levels, in every arena where deliberations are made which affect the nature of citizen participation.

You have a valuable contribution to make beyond your own organization simply by virtue of the unique things that you experience each day. You are privy, by virtue of your involvement in the volunteer sector, to specific community problems, strengths, trends, and resources. This information and this perspective make you a valuable contributor beyond your own organization.

As members of the subculture of volunteerism, we have a critical role. Because of our membership in this subculture, our eyes see different things, our ears hear different voices, our feet lead us down different paths, and our brains come up with different solutions. These perspectives are important contributions to the traditional institutions of each of our communities.

Volunteering today is a paradox. It is the same and yet it is different.

As the leaders in this field, we keep one foot in tradition and one foot in change. We are, at the same time, current and relevant while retaining and promoting the values that

gives us stability and character.

This volunteer community to which we belong has always, everywhere, been the first to draw attention to those aspects of society that needed change. Some small group of volunteers has always been the first to identify the illness and diseases that were not receiving adequate attention; the disenfranchised groups who had special needs to be met and special contributions to be made; the paucity of enriching activities to feed the spirits of our citizens; the issues that portend for serious consequence if not attended to. Our volunteer community has always played this role.

And now, more than at any other time in our history, we see volunteerism being recognized for its role in the development of the civil society. It is being appreciated as a vital partner in empowering an active citizenry.

The challenge to us as professional managers is tremendous! The good news is that as I travel from country to country, I see this challenge being met regularly with excitement and creativity.

I see that which is not given a lot of printed or media space. I see you and your colleagues tending to both personal and professional growth. I hear a unified voice speaking on behalf of involved citizens. I see a field of professional managers accomplishing extraordinary things.

As you attend the rest of this conference, and when you go back to your desks on Monday, do it with a sense of pride knowing that you are engaged in a serious and important field, and that you are making an important contribution in a changing world in which the rules are still being written.

Accept the thanks of all your colleagues worldwide for your commitment and your contribution. Give it your best effort. Welcome the challenges. Rejoice in your successes. You make us all proud!