

1988 National Conference on
Volunteer Administration

Association for Volunteer Administration Distinguished Member Service Award Acceptance Speech

Winifred L. Brown, CVA

At the 1988 National Conference on Volunteer Administration, Winifred L. Brown, CVA, was presented with AVA's Distinguished Member Service Award. Ms. Brown is Executive Director of the Mayor's Voluntary Action Center of New York City. She is the former National Director of Personnel and Training for Camp Fire Girls, Inc., and Field Representative for the American Red Cross in the five chapters of Greater New York. She is currently: First Vice-President of the National Board of AVA; member of the National Board of VOLUNTEER: The National Center; local board member of Literacy Volunteers of NYC and Rehabilitation Through Photography; and member of the Advisory Council for the Cornell University Cooperative Extension Service in NYC. She has received the Community Action Award from the Corporate Volunteers of NY; the Winifred Fisher Award in Adult Education from the NY Adult Education Council; and the Civic Award from RSVP in NYC. In 1988, she received an Honorary Doctorate in Public Service from Vermont College of Norwich University (VT).

I wonder if you can imagine how I feel today. First, to receive an award named after a long-time colleague and friend. Second, to be recognized by one's peers for a job well done.

Most of us work in a setting where the top administrator may not know a great deal about our field—and we are usually the only person holding the position of volunteer administrator. When that top administrator credits us for doing a superb job, how does s/he know? What standard is being used? Similarly, we may sometimes be criticized for not fulfilling an expectation. Again, by what standard are we being judged? Therefore, recognition by one's peers represents a special measure of informed recognition of a job well done.

Harriet Naylor and I met for the first time at a meeting of a planning group for a volunteer conference under the aegis of the National Social Welfare Assembly thirty-five years ago. She was representing the National Board of the YWCA and making the transition from long-term volunteer to professional staff. I had just accepted a position with Camp Fire Girls, Inc. How amazed we would have been if we could have known then that she would become the first nationally recognized leader in our field, a mentor to thousands, and author of several classic texts in the field! And we would have found it unbelievable that I would be receiving this Distinguished Member Award from a national organization that was not even in existence. I'm afraid we would have laughed at the sheer incredibility of it all.

I want the planners of this outstanding conference to know that in my years of conference attendance I have never been as stimulated and challenged by three major speakers. Although I had heard two of them before, it was the unique juxtaposition of the three topic areas—all approaching the issue of change—that made an almost overwhelming impact.

What we have learned here about the future presents an overwhelming challenge to every one of us. If we ever had any doubt about the value of our international association, it should have been dispelled here. What we have been exposed to would

be impossible to get through a local group. We have been made aware of aspects of the future with significant implications for volunteer administration. Our roles will never be quite the same again, and we must begin to face that fact and prepare *now* for what lies ahead. We are in the process of major revolutions—sociologically, economically, technologically, and politically. Mayor Cisneros has targeted our field as a key factor in helping society move through this period.

Unfortunately, here in Denver, we represent only a small fraction of the people in our field in the United States and Canada, many of whom will never be able to afford attendance at a national conference. Each of us has an obligation to impart a measure of what we have learned here to those from our home communities. Whatever we can do to communicate locally—and to increase AVA's visibility and membership—we must do. The importance of the Regions in reaching our constituency directly has never been clearer.

It is exciting to experience the international flavor of volunteerism. Each year, my office hosts a group of international visitors, mostly from Third World countries. At first, they came solely to learn from us. Now they also come to share.

I am proud that I became a CVA this year. It made me focus anew on what I believe about volunteerism and analyze my managerial skills. Certification is not an end in itself but a tool AVA developed to help us define a philosophy for the field and the standards of performance required for competence. Ours is an emerging profession, and membership in AVA gives us an opportunity to participate in its evolution, unlike so many others that were defined and delineated many years ago.

After forty years in the field, it was not easy to compress what I believe into 1000 words or less. Give me three hours and I could have told you. But that isn't good enough. Any new professional should be able to ask and expect a sharp, concise answer. Let me share just a few points from my own statement of philosophy.

1. I believe that volunteerism is the hallmark of a free society, not merely a response to fiscal shortages. It gives every citizen the right to make a personal investment in building the community and a role in shaping the quality of life. Mayor Cisneros said that an involved citizenry indicates a healthy community. When we lose opportunities to volunteer, we erode a part of our democratic ideal. There are those who would point out that many countries with limited freedom provide opportunities for service. This may be true, but opportunity for a most important aspect of volunteerism in a free society—advocacy for and action toward change—would not be tolerated. Participation in the process of change is not limited to rallies, and sign waving, and letters to public officials. A volunteer tutor who teaches someone to read changes the life of that person and affects the life of future generations. It is important for the tutor to understand that an inadequate system of education and/or conditions in the social order may create the need for that volunteer assignment. Personal, hands-on experience may well turn that tutor into a change agent at the ballot box and in community efforts to bring about reform.
2. I believe in the universality of critical issues today, *i.e.*, homelessness, hunger, AIDS, literacy, housing, unemployment. Agencies and organizations can no longer remain in isolated areas of service. Therefore, as a volunteer administrator I must be alert to linkages between my agency's purpose and the possibility of impact on any of these problems through volunteer intervention. I must be prepared to join in opportunities for networking, collaborating, cooperation and barter with all sectors to find solutions.
3. I believe that volunteers should be reflective of the community as well as diverse in age, personality, and points of view—not clones of one staff type. As a volunteer administrator, I should welcome the strength of diversity and not fear the risk of conflict or those who are different or smarter than I am. I must remain nonjudgmental about those who may come from other backgrounds or have other lifestyles or value systems. I must learn as much as possible about them.

4. I believe that professionalism in this field requires me to grow and expand my own knowledge and skills, to seek out new ideas and approaches, to not only accept—but welcome—change. This means that as a volunteer administrator, I should participate in the professional association, take time to encourage others with potential to join the field, to share my expertise with others, attend training, and take part in community planning efforts.

Collectively, we are enablers and deployers of the nation's most powerful resource, the embodiment of the democratic ideal, and a vital component in helping individuals, communities, and nations to reach their highest goals.

Appendix A is included at the author's suggestion. It was developed as part of the requirement for obtaining professional certification in volunteer administration.

APPENDIX A Philosophy Statement

I believe that volunteerism is a hallmark of a free society offering citizens the right to make a personal investment in building the community and shaping the quality of its life—not only through service but through advocacy for change. As a volunteer administrator, I must be an articulator and guardian of this principle, careful to describe my role in terms of mission, not merely a succession of tasks. I must be prepared to advocate on behalf of volunteerism within the agency and emphasize that volunteerism is more than a response to a need arising out of fiscal shortages, but rather a citizen's right and challenge to effect change.

I believe that people need opportunities to reach out beyond themselves, to share in the actions and decisions that affect them. Volunteerism offers these opportunities on the broadest level for those who are interested in societal impact, as well as in the narrower sense of special concern. I must remain sensitive and alert to trends and help volunteers to recognize how their volunteer activity fits into agency goals and objectives. I must see that this principle is translated into agency structure and practice.

I believe that money is not the criterion of personal worth, nor is salary part of the definition of work. Competence, creativity, concern, and skill define the parameters. I have an obligation to determine the skills needed, to target the potential volunteer population, to recruit the best persons available, and to record their service. I must provide volunteers with the tools for transferring their volunteer skills and experience into education and/or employment credit.

I believe in the worth of each individual and his/her power to make a difference. This principle is threatened today by computerism, bureaucracy, urban complexity, and an unprofessional view of professionalism that limits the vision of skill and competence to those with degrees and who are salaried. I must work constantly on volunteer job development, be prepared to do battle for volunteer input, and be vigilant in recognition of volunteer achievement.

I believe in the value of human development and in the ability of people to grow and that ignorance is one of the greatest threats to a free society. I subscribe to Mary Scott Welch's statement in her article in the *Ladies Home Journal* on "The New Volunteer" that "In volunteering, it isn't what you give or even what you receive. It is what you become." Therefore, I must see that ongoing training is provided throughout the volunteer's career with the agency, that promotional opportunities are made available, even if it means losing that person's service to another agency. And, I must see that each person is made aware of his/her own growth on the job.

I believe that there is a volunteer opportunity for almost every person, even though not every assignment is for every volunteer. I accept the challenge laid down by Harriet Naylor, "to counsel people in rather than screen them out." This obligates me

to find referrals outside of our own agency for the volunteer who may not fit into our needs, so that the person is not rejected.

I believe that volunteers in an agency should be reflective of the community, not of the staff or volunteer administrator. I must, therefore, remain objective in making judgments about others who may come from different backgrounds, lifestyles, or value systems and make a concerted effort to learn more about those whom I will recruit and/or serve in the community.

I believe in the universality of certain critical issues today, *i.e.*, homelessness, hunger, AIDS, literacy, unemployment. I must be constantly alert to linkages between my agency's purpose and the possibility of impact on any of these problems through volunteer program intervention. To do this, I must also believe in the value of networking, barter, collaboration with all sectors of society to find ways of resolving these problems.

I believe that efficiency, economy, and productivity, without the sacrifice of human considerations and quality, are important goals. I must search "to live with bigness" and to find ways of achieving "quantity with quality." I must not settle for limiting service to a select few as the only way of offering a quality program. I must also demonstrate my own belief in volunteerism by extending my own department's services through volunteers.

I believe that professionalism requires me to grow and expand in my skills and knowledge and to volunteer myself on behalf of the field. This means that I must participate in the professional association, provide information and research data when called upon, take time to encourage others with potential to join the field, and share any expertise I have with others.

Collectively, we are enablers and deployers of the nation's most powerful resource, the embodiment of the democratic ideal, and a vital component in helping individuals, communities, and nations to reach their highest goals.