

THE DOLL HOUSE:

An Adventure in Staff/Volunteer Cooperation

By Judith H. Cox

Although volunteering has a long and honorable history, and although the profession of the Director of Volunteer Services has been "emerging" for some time, there is still a tendency in too many agencies to view the volunteer aspect of planning as an add-on, bandaied type of service. Administrators make plans, set short and long-term goals, define objectives and then say, "Now, if we can find some really qualified volunteers . . ."

The miracle is that so many of these bandaied programs work as well as they do. However, by involving both staff and volunteer components in the initial planning, "miracles" turn out to be dependable, successful management procedures, with results that more than justify the time and effort spent in co-planning.

Recently, Goodwill Industries of Akron Inc. has been able to implement such a mutually planned project. Arising from a genuine staff need and embracing an area already using volunteers, a totally new program has been developed.

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Since 1957, Goodwill of Akron has been involved in "Dolly Derby"* , a special project in cooperation with the local Girl Scout Council. The Girl Scouts take dolls received by Goodwill from community donations, design and sew outfits for them, then return the dolls to Goodwill for judging on the basis of design suitability and workmanship. This provides the Scouts with a service project while providing Goodwill with dressed dolls for sale at our retail outlets.

The growth of this project created several problem areas for our local Goodwill. Excessive staff time was required for the detail work involved in coordinating the local and national displays. Storage space for the dolls was filled to overflowing. The number of troop leaders and girls coming into the plant to select dolls, while not steady or ongoing, still interrupted work in process in the Public Relations Department.

The final straw was a series of fires which totally eliminated our available storage space. At that time our problems in maintaining "Dolly Derby" became critical. We were faced, basically, with three choices: (1) eliminate our involvement with dolls (2) try to maintain our doll program in a more limited form; or (3) make a radical change in our approach to handling the dolls.

* Registered Trade Mark

It is significant that a push for change, rather than program elimination, came initially from staff, and bubbled up through the informal, over-the-coffee-cups channel of communication. This meant that the brainstorming effort flowed freely and creatively, unhampered by such territorial imperatives as who would be in charge, how we would finance it, or where we would find room for it.

Fortunately, over the years we had developed a volunteer component in our doll program. To implement the changes we were suggesting meant that we would have to lean even more heavily on volunteer participation and volunteer leadership. Consequently, we started at the beginning to involve both volunteers and staff in our planning.

To solve the critical shortage of storage space, we knew we would have to move the dolls quickly, and that we would no longer be able to stockpile for "Dolly Derby." Therefore, we needed some arrangement that would: (1) relieve the crowding; (2) make dolls more easily available to the Scouts; and (3) ease the work load for the Public Relations department.

Our basic idea was to set aside an area in our main Goodwill store where a sales boutique -- The Doll House -- would be constructed. This shop would handle the sale of dolls, doll clothes, doll accessories, as well as coordinate the distribution of dolls for "Dolly Derby." Additionally, it would supply space for the display of "Dolly Derby" winners. We envisioned the shop being manned totally by volunteers, under the direction of a volunteer Project Coordinator. Staff supervision would reside with the Public Relations Supervisor, under the general direction of the Director of Volunteer Services.

Step one of the plan was to acquaint the Executive Director with our rough plans and seek his approval and support for the project. Once this approval was obtained, we set up our first formal meeting bringing together all staff and volunteers who would have a direct part in implementing the project. Staff members represented Accounting, Operations, Sales, Maintenance, Public Relations and Volunteer Services. The volunteers were represented by the two experienced Doll Volunteers who would be co-ordinators of the project.

By the end of this meeting, we had developed:

- 1) *A floor plan for the shop;*

- 2) *A financial projection of \$6,000 in yearly sales to justify the floor space;*
- 3) *The names of two retired carpenters who might volunteer to do the actual construction;*
- 4) *A request to the Goodwill Auxiliary for seed money for materials;*
- 5) *Specific assignments for each participant;*
- 6) *A target date of eight weeks to opening;*
- 7) *Additional enthusiasm for the project.*

Since we intended to be action-oriented, we moved directly from planning to implementation, with each participant carrying out his individual assignment. Areas of concern were:

- 1) Accounting--*Set up a budget; oversee purchasing of necessary materials;*
- 2) Operations/Sales--*See that the designated store area was cleared and made available;*
- 3) Maintenance--*Generally oversee construction; possibly release one employee to assist the volunteer carpenters;*
- 4) Public Relations--*Develop radio/T V media releases; assist in recruitment of new volunteers;*
- 5) Volunteer Services--*Approach the Goodwill Auxiliary for seed money; develop job descriptions; plan and implement recruitment; develop a training program; establish (with Operations) overall policy;*
- 6) Doll Volunteers--*Line up volunteer carpenters (family members of one of the volunteers); assist with job descriptions; physical preparation of dolls for sale.*

Although the Doll House was not designed as a project for our Auxiliary, it was felt to be beneficial to involve Auxiliary membership as early as possible in the process. We wanted to reassure them that the new sales boutique would not interfere with their established Gift

Shop, also located in the main store. Rather, we hoped that The Doll House and the Gift Shop would benefit mutually through an increase in customers. Nor would The Doll House be competing with the Auxiliary for the same volunteers. Primarily we would be reaching out for new volunteers, but this would in no way preclude these new volunteers from potential membership in the Auxiliary.

Actual construction started as soon as the selected store area was cleared. The shop, built by two volunteer carpenters assisted by one maintenance employee, incorporated pecan paneling, a thatched roof, and large display window. Inside, the walls were lined with shelves. Two showcases provided display and protection for the dolls, and a large bin in the center was set aside for smaller, less expensive items.

A public relations program began with radio spots and posters asking for volunteers. An article written by one of the volunteers was published in a local weekly paper. Feature articles appeared in the Akron Beacon Journal about both "Dolly Derby" and the Doll House. We were fortunate during this period to have national celebrities Nanette Fabray and Phyllis Diller, visit our Goodwill and The Doll House. The resulting TV coverage brought our need for volunteers before the public in a very positive manner.

With the help of our "Doll Vols," we drew up job descriptions for persons doing doll preparation, doll dressing, and doll sales, as well as for the position of Project Coordinator. These volunteers also had great input into establishing the "do's" and "don'ts" for sales volunteers. Volunteers have continued to work with the Director of Volunteer Services in the recruitment process. Their enthusiasm for the dolls and for the project has been directly instrumental in bringing new volunteers into the program.

Although the primary emphasis in the boutique is on doll sales, The Doll House volunteers worked cooperatively with the Auxiliary in manning the All-American "Dolly Derby" display at an Akron shopping mall. For the first time in the history of "Dolly Derby" it was not necessary for the Public Relations supervisor to use members of her paid staff to cover the activities at the mall, with the result that ongoing projects and day-to-day assignments were not interrupted or brought to a standstill by "Dolly Derby." This savings in staff time and effort was due solely to the cooperative efforts of both new and experienced volunteers.

To our delight, we were able to adhere closely to our time schedule, opening The Doll House just one week beyond our original projection. The shop is currently manned twenty-four hours per week. Gross income has exceeded expectations. Although it is far too soon to predict a yearly sales figure, we are running well ahead of the \$1,500 per quarter (\$6,000 per year) break-even figure we had originally set.

To help insure ongoing success, staff and volunteers are continuing to work closely together. Doll Project meetings are held monthly with all volunteers and any interested staff member invited to attend. Through these regular sessions, problem areas or interpersonal frictions can be brought into the open and resolved before they create difficulties which might jeopardize the overall project. Too, as we gain experience, we can institute changes with the informed knowledge of all participants.

Even with such a high degree of staff/volunteer cooperation, we have stumbled into an occasional pitfall. Our "basic sketch" floor plans left much to be desired by those who did the actual construction; the unavoidable noise and debris of construction caused some problems; one or two of the Auxiliary members continue to feel threatened by the project; and some of our staff members who really enjoyed working with the dolls have been reluctant to let the volunteers function as independently as we would like them to.

Also at the suggestion of our Finance Director and our Store Manager, we have revised our reporting procedures and our method of handling funds.

Our original problems have been solved. Instead of limiting or abandoning our doll program, we have enlarged its size, function and scope. Staff has been freed from the demands of "Dolly Derby" detail work. The display and sale of dolls has reduced our storage problems to manageable size. Girl Scouts and leaders wishing to select dolls no longer have to enter the production areas but can pick out their dolls at The Doll House.

From a genuine crisis situation we have moved toward productivity and earned income. Staff and volunteers alike are reaping the dividends of their mutual investment of time, effort and action. By working together from the very beginning, staff and volunteers have brought about meaningful results:

- 1) Staff and volunteers developed a commitment to the success of the project from the very beginning through the process of shared planning;
- 2) Potential problems have been avoided by meeting cooperatively during the period of implementation;
- 3) The project itself came to fruition quickly, due to concurrent assignments during the planning process;
- 4) Necessary adjustments and changes were made in the original plan with a minimum of friction;
- 5) Staff and volunteers developed confidence in the project, in themselves, and in each other.

We are optimistic for the future. With the steady growth in volunteer staff, we hope to expand The Doll House operations from four hours a day (six days a week) to full day operations within the next year. We feel confident that we will meet and, hopefully, surpass our original sales estimate of \$6,000 per year. And we foresee even greater volunteer participation in the "Dolly Derby" process.

A miracle? No, just the cooperation of staff and volunteers from the very beginning, not only in the planning, but in the work as well.