

A Philosophy of Volunteers and Volunteerism

By Sue Vineyard

The parts in Brackets → [Simply stated, I believe volunteers and volunteerism are the only hope for the future of mankind. Agencies, corporations, conglomerates, and governments will not have the resources or personnel to stave off the ravages of poverty, deprivation, disease, and hopelessness of the two-thirds of our world who go to bed each night in suffering, with their only prayer being that they see the dawn.]

As children die at the rate of 70 per minute, simply from lack of proper food; as 85 percent of the world's deaths are caused simply by lack of clean water; as despair overtakes three-fourths of our global brothers each day because of the lack of promise in their lives, we realize that only a miracle can beat down the enemy of want these figures represent.

→ [The only "power" equal to such an awesome task is the power of Love ... generated not by law or decree, not by corporate studies or government grants, not by planning commissions or conglomerate committees, but by dedicated individuals, willing to commit their time, their talents, and their hearts to others.]

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The hope of tomorrow lies not with giants with corporate titles but with common ordinary people willing to tackle uncommon, extra-ordinary goals; people willing to set aside their own personal comfort and convenience, to reach out through love and commitment to touch another human soul.

While on a trip to one of Project Concern's Nutrition Centers located in the remote areas of Guatemala, I came face to face with my "philosophy" of volunteerism. There in the tin-roofed, stone-walled Center, set amid the ancient volcanoes that have for hundreds of years been the home of the Mayan Indians and their present descendants that we serve, I had my convictions tested as never before.

In a dark corner of the hut on a rough straw mat on the dirt floor were three children. The two older... a girl approximately 6 and a boy 3 or 4 ... were busy tending to a dirty bundle of rags that held their 18 month old sister. Only 11 pounds, she lay perfectly still except for the slow, methodical blinking of her eyes. Her emaciated body was held together by waxen skin through which you could see every bone and vein. Her hair was brittle and dull and in patches on her pathetic head. As I sat down with them, I saw the children were busy shooping flies and insects, stroking their baby sister gently, and softly cooing to this wasted child. Our nutritionist told me that the two older children were standing

the "death watch" - an Indian custom that says when a child is dying, family members stay with them, touching them, comforting them, and helping them pass from this painful world on to the next life.

At about this time another member of our party, who had brought his Polaroid camera, began snapping pictures of the children and their mothers in front of the Center, and showing them the picture. As the excited babble washed inside the Center, the two children looked longingly to the activity outside. Their desire to join it, to experience that rare commodity of fun, to leave for a few moments the reality of life and death, was obvious.

As I studied the face of the older child, she turned to me with an inquiring look. Though we spoke no common tongue, we found a common language by which to communicate...the language of love and shared concern. Her eyes eagerly asked, "Can you help us? Can you sit here and take on our death watch, assuring our sister she is loved and not alone? Can you come from your warm home, your full table, your abundant life to sit here on a dirty, smelly, straw mat on a dusty floor in the middle of nowhere and tend to our needs? Can you love us that much?"

The tears in my eyes and a reassuring nod gave her my answer and they promptly scurried outside to be children for a few precious moments.

I turned then to my charge ... my dying child...shooing the flies, cooing softly and placing my finger in her emaciated hand. Her black onyx eyes fastened tightly on my face and as she slowly blinked, I felt the slightest of pressure as she clung to my finger in her acceptance of me.

She did not die in my sight, but she changed my life. What had been a philosophy now became a fierce conviction. What I had spoken of to others figuratively now became reality.

Those children, in their suffering, in their acceptance, had asked of me what must be asked of each person blessed with health and hope..."Can you really love us? Love us enough to come to our needs and to do whatever is required to relieve our suffering?"

The world, if it is to survive, can have only one answer - "Love you? I am you!" And this answer can only be given by individuals who will volunteer what they have and are to share with others.

[It is to us, the leaders of volunteers, that the responsibility comes to enable the most productive and positive results of volunteerism.] It is our service to them that will build the bridge from the pain of today to the hope of tomorrow. [The future of mankind rests with us.]

My attitude on volunteers comes from my deep belief in volunteerism and causes me to believe that the volunteers deserve our best efforts to enable them to grow and develop. They deserve to have responsibility to the level they are capable and desirous; to provide solid training and continuing opportunities for education; to involve them in decision making areas that affect them; and to respect their right for proper evaluation.]

I believe the roles of volunteers should be clearly defined but flexible enough to stimulate growth. Their potential and ability should be the key factor in their promotion to levels of higher responsibility, and their "volunteer" status should have no bearing. As responsibility is increased with the volunteer, broader parameters and definitions of their areas of responsibility should be given so that they can be creative in their higher position. [An "under used" volunteer is too great a loss to society.]

Volunteers deserve the best possible communications with the agency for which they work to insure good input and feedback. They also deserve volunteer management's attention to a positive, conducive job climate that stimulates efforts while accomplishing goals.

Volunteers deserve to understand short and long term goals, not only of their particular assignments, but of the client-related aspects of the agency.

In short, the volunteer deserves our respect for his or her time, energies, motivations, sensitivities, skills, needs, commitment, input, and potential. It is our responsibility as volunteer managers to mesh these skills with the agency's needs to enhance both volunteer and agency goals through sensitive management, enabling growth and accomplishment to come to their highest levels to serve mankind.