

RESEARCH TRANSLATION

Edited by Sarah Jane Rehnberg

This article was adapted for publication from a paper presented at the 26th Annual Workshop of The Association of Volunteer Bureaus, Inc., Detroit, Michigan, May 1977.

THE YOUTHFUL VOLUNTEER IN THE SEVENTIES: A TARNISHED VISION

By Larry Stockman

*"Your old men shall dream dreams,
your young men shall see visions."*

(Joel 2:28)

Introduction

Young people in the seventies, just like those of the thirties, fifties and sixties, want to be respected for what they are as individuals and for their achievements. Their greatest concern, not unlike that of their predecessors, is self-fulfillment. Like those before them they still see visions, not with the idealism so common in the early sixties but with a pragmatic realism taught through the anti-war protests of the late sixties and the tarnished images of so many of their leaders and heroes of the sixties and seventies. If the moods and behavior of American youth change, however, it is not without significant and profound societal change.

Recalling the past twenty years, we become very aware that societal change has been both frequent and massive. The Eisenhower years suggested political

passivity, cultural conformity, conservatism and economic ambition. The Camelot period offered a new consciousness to youth as a social force, a spirited idealism and a new concern for minorities and their rights. With that spirit hundreds of thousands of Americans volunteered to spend years of their lives, to live in difficult environments, and to give for their neighbor - simply because they enjoyed it.

Then the escalation of the Vietnam War seemed to cast a spell of cynicism, helplessness and anger over the nation as a whole. As the war continued to expand and intensify, so did the escape into the new drug culture. As the nation had been asked previously to help its neighbors, it was now asked to help kill them. America grew sick with depression, paranoia and a rampant schizophrenia. Rejecting the war meant rejecting not only authority, institutions and their leaders, but the traditional success goals and the rationale for caring about one's country and its leaders, one's church, school, community, and too often, one's family.

In the early seventies, new revelations of corruption in politics, mismanagement of the FBI and the CIA, and the growing concern about the world network of multi-national corporations have aroused some concern, but for the most part, the young people of this generation appear almost as quiet and hard working as those of some twenty years ago. Even so, there are significant differences.

Larry Stockman is a Catholic priest with the Diocese of Jefferson City, Mo. He is currently a doctoral candidate in Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. He has worked extensively with the Quechua Indians in Peru.

Not to understand and appreciate the patterns of behavior and the mercurial moods of the young is to neglect a major and potentially powerful volunteer force. As a result, I shall attempt to accomplish the following objectives:

- 1) *to offer a profile of today's youth based upon national, regional and local studies;*
- 2) *to consider young people's motives for volunteering and some possible new challenges to American youth for volunteering in the twilight years of the seventies; and*
- 3) *to suggest some alternatives for program development for both the paid employees of volunteer programs and volunteer coordinators.*

The resources of youth are nearly limitless, and there are literally thousands of ways of utilizing those resources effectively. The unmet needs of our society are enormous and there is a place for any young person who wants to become involved in the fulfillment of some of those needs. Further, young people yearn to be needed, for not to be so devastates their self-esteem, potential for achievement and personal satisfaction. Never have the opportunities for young people to serve and help been so manifold. Fortunately, government commissions and agencies, schools and universities, hospitals, civic organizations, prisons and even corporations and multi-nationals are increasingly aware today of the importance of involving youth in work projects.

Many of these agencies recognize the dilemma of most youth - satiation with information and ideas, yet a hunger for real-life skills and experiences. Francis Bacon understood this yearning and expressed it succinctly about 400 years ago when he said, "Youth are fitter to invent than to judge, fitter for execution than for counsel, and fitter for new projects than for settled business."¹

Young people in 1977 are:

- (1) Awaiting the challenge;
- (2) Yearning for experience;
- (3) Groping for self-esteem;
- (4) Searching for self-fulfillment.

The key to it all might be to offer the opportunities and to make certain that the young shall continue to have many visions and not be forced only to dream.

Profile of Today's Youth

Research suggests that directors, coordinators and leaders of volunteer centers and programs should be optimistic about the next few years. Major studies (Nehnevajsa & Karelitz, 1976; Americans Volunteer, 1974) indicate a continual rise in voluntarism for all age groups. In 1974 a national survey was conducted for Action in which sixteen major cities throughout the United States were selected for analysis (See Table 1, pg. 21). In his analysis of this data, Nehnevajsa (edition forthcoming) suggests that young people up to eighteen years of age keep pace with the overall volunteering percentages. In fact, in St. Louis (10.8), San Francisco (6.0), Detroit (5.2), Minneapolis (0.7), Washington, D. C., (0.3) and Denver (0.2), the percentage of young volunteers is higher than the overall percentages.

A national study just being completed at the Center for Urban Research in Pittsburgh² reveals that in 1976, 38.3 percent of the people in the United States (overall population), but only 24.5% of our young people (20 years of age and below) are involved in volunteering (See Table 2, pg. 21). This represents a differential of 13.8 percent. Likewise, overall, Americans average 373 hours of volunteer work per year, whereas youth average 249 hours, a 124 hour average difference per year.

These two studies indicate that while there seems to be an increase in both the percentage and average hours volunteered overall during the past three years (1974-76), young people may not be following that general pattern. It is true that there is an increase in the number of hours volunteered, but the fact that only 24.5 percent of the young people are currently volunteering as opposed to 38.3 percent overall suggests that some further analysis is necessary.

A 1974 national survey of young Americans (18 years of age and under) conducted by the Gilbert Youth Research Corporation³ did not ask specific questions about volunteering. Nevertheless some of the results of that study imply specific behavioral patterns, attitudes and values of young people which, I think, have a bearing upon volunteerism. For example, 92% of those surveyed believe that high school students should work; 77% say they are satisfied with their high school training; 59% felt that they have good

Table 1

National Percentages and Average Hours of Volunteering for the Total Population and Youth up to Eighteen Years of Age for Sixteen Major U. S. Cities*

City		Total Population		Up to Eighteen Years of Age	
		Percentage	Hours	Percentage	Hours
Philadelphia	(12)	21.4	133.4	25.0	91.7
Seattle	(1)	40.1	114.1	42.3	51.2
Minneapolis	(5)	32.6	118.9	33.3	119.1
San Francisco	(7)	26.1	163.0	32.1	61.2
Washington, D.C.	(8)	25.5	151.6	25.8	78.1
St. Louis	(4)	35.0	146.1	45.8	119.0
Atlanta	(6)	27.8	109.0	22.7	70.1
Indianapolis	(2)	39.3	94.1	36.8	53.6
Denver	(3)	35.5	77.7	35.7	50.0
Dallas	(10)	23.2	157.8	11.4	119.0
Baltimore	(11)	23.1	123.7	17.4	118.7
Los Angeles	(13)	20.9	155.2	9.9	80.5
Boston	(15)	15.9	117.3	9.1	45.8
New York	(16)	12.2	177.0	10.2	289.7
Chicago	(14)	19.0	103.7	12.5	97.1
Detroit	(9)	23.6	91.1	28.8	32.4

*American Volunteers Survey, 1974, ACTION, Washington, D.C.

Table 2

Groupings of Volunteers	Percentages	Average Hours Per Year
Overall	38.3	372.8
Twenty years of age & younger	24.5	249.1

relationships with their teachers. Furthermore, 92% list "happiness in life" as their primary goal, and 46% expect to make more than \$25,000 annually at the peak of their careers.

What do such statistics reveal about young volunteers? First of all, the overwhelming majority of students want to work, at least part-time, year-round; yet, only half of the students are actually employed. In other words, there are a great many young people wanting to get involved in work-like projects, but expectations are not being met in numerous cases.

Secondly, while there is some student discontent regarding relationships with teachers (41%), the majority of students are positive. Teacher disinterest and apathy are listed as the major causes of poor relations. However, students are quick to praise those teachers who give individual assistance, who show a desire to help, an ability to relate and a pleasant personality. Above all, 77% of the students claim to be satisfied with their high school training. Although this information is not directly relevant to volunteerism, it does indicate that generally young people today want their teachers to be concerned, involved and personable. The question as to whether the qualities students expect in their teachers and leaders are the qualities they themselves possess remains to be answered.

Thirdly, nearly half of today's high school students expect to earn more than \$25,000 and three-fourths expect an income of over \$15,000 annually at their career peak - rather high expectations I would think. These aspirations not only differ from those students over the past twenty years, but also differ radically from the income level of their own parents. Again, although not directly related to volunteerism, these attitudes regarding making money do support the feelings of volunteer coordinators I have spoken with, namely, that young people are willing to volunteer when it fits into their school work and/or their career plans.

Fourthly, the Gilbert national study finds that whereas only one-fourth of the young people attend church regularly, more than fifty percent consider themselves to be religious. Nevertheless, students' interests and energies are channeled into school, work, and activities with their friends rather than into their religious beliefs. In support of these findings, in the national study just completed by the Center for Urban Research at Pittsburgh, it was found that only 11% of those volunt-

earing have either a weak or no religious commitment, while 67% have a strong commitment to religion. Totally, 89% of the volunteers are committed to religion.

Last year we surveyed the values and attitudes of the 29,888 students at the University of Pittsburgh, a large urban institution. Over half of its students are commuters and tend to be conservative and highly career-oriented. An ethnic and religious flavor is also prevalent within the student body. In this study we asked students about volunteering. Overall, 45% reported that they do volunteer work, and that 54% of their fathers and 67% of their mothers volunteer as well. We were unable to distinguish any notable difference in volunteering patterns according to ethnic background and preference. However, the religious variable was significant as far as volunteerism is concerned, both according to religious background and type of volunteer work (See Table 3, page 23).

Through the research data presented I have tried to paint a profile of the young person today, to focus on those economic, social and cultural characteristics which have the strongest bearing upon young people. In summary to this section I believe the following conclusive statements express adequately the attitude of youth today.

- *Today's youth have little interest in fighting a social revolution.*
- *Today's youth, however, are interested in today's world - very interested. They have a new approach - bite off a small piece and work exclusively at what's wrong until it's corrected.*
- *Changing the world, or even the United States is not their major goal - community involvement and action is their approach.*
- *Today's youth are pragmatic - they take their problems as they come. They plod along - getting through school, getting a job, beginning on a career.*
- *Today's youth are honest and forthright, and they expect their leaders to be the same.*

Table 3

University of Pittsburgh: Volunteering Percentages
of Students and their Fathers and Mothers
by Major Religious Preference
(as estimated by the students - 1976)

Religious Preference	Student	Father	Mother
Protestant (19%)	47.6	52.9	70.5
Catholic (31%)	44.5	51.8	63.9
Jewish (10.5%)	55.6	57.1	76.7
Agnostic (20%)	39.2	52.6	65.8
Others (19.5%)	48.7	64.7	63.2
Overall	45.0	54.0	67.0

Program Development and Effective Youth Participation Projects.

Effective projects involving young volunteers flourish with a common purpose. Since our American culture with its bureaucratic and efficient division of labor gives young people so few opportunities to gain experience, it seems crucial to develop projects with the common goals of helping the young to mature, to achieve and to develop confidence about participating in the adult world. The problem (or question) is this: how does the coordinator or leader determine whether a project will meet these goals?

1. The primary means, I think, is to study other projects, to meet their leaders, to present and discuss programs, to identify the characteristics evident in effective programs - traits which make programs more worthwhile.

2. A major criterion is to insure that the project is meeting the needs of the young people involved. If young people are going to enjoy their work and continue to participate, they ought to get the style and the plan of the program. They are looking for self-fulfillment, a way to develop the tools for maturing. This means that the young volunteers should participate not only in implementing the project, but also in its planning. In this manner, the young volunteers are challenged, and meeting the

challenge ultimately enhances one's self esteem.

A working relationship with adult leaders and volunteers can be highly productive. In such a partnership, each age group senses their mutual responsibility as learning and support resources for the other. Likewise, such a partnership in planning and work gives the feeling that the volunteer belongs and is accepted by others whom he/she respects. Any alienation or helplessness the young volunteers might feel at home or in other aspects of their lives is counteracted by the unity expressed in the collegialship of a project designed towards significant common goals.

3. A third major criterion for ensuring the effectiveness and merit of a project is to make sure that the project truly meets the needs of those involved or affected by it - the needs of the community.

The work or volunteering activity ought to meet a real community need. It should not be designed merely to keep the volunteers busy. I would think that the leaders need to ask this question: "What is the most crucial community problem and can the young volunteers help wipe out a community problem by participating?" Likewise, it should be clear that adults whom the young respect are those who hold the project in esteem.

While working at the project, an effective coordinator will make certain that the young volunteers are encouraged to analyze their participation, to reflect upon their work and to continually search for improvements to the project. Discussions ought to be facilitated and group dynamics and communications worked at constantly. Both the volunteers and their leaders and coordinators ought to reassess the goals, objectives and effectiveness of the project frequently. Additional research is needed in this area. Another area crying for research deals with the many learning opportunities and types of effective participation available through youth volunteer programs.

Conclusions

In summary, I will list the following:

- 1) *Ethnic background does not significantly change the volunteering patterns of young people.*
- 2) *Parental example (especially the example of the father) does effect the volunteering practices of young people.*
- 3) *Strength of religious commitment suggests two patterns: those who have a deep religious commitment demonstrate a high volunteering rate. However, many young people today who reject the formal and organized religion of their parents also have a high volunteering rate. The difference lies in the fact that those who have little feeling for or against organized religion also have low volunteering rates.*
- 4) *Young people list "happiness" as their life goal, and major research findings indicate that people volunteer because they enjoy it.*
- 5) *Today's youth do not want to fight a social revolution; however, they are ready to "do what they can" and work at it until the wrong is corrected.*
- 6) *Today's youth are not setting out to change the world, rather, community involvement and action is their concern.*
- 7) *Today's youth are conservative, practical and concerned about getting through school, finding a job and getting on with their career.*
- 8) *Today's youth are honest and forthright, and they expect all their leaders to be the same.*
- 9) *Today's youth are looking for a cause, not something grandiose; rather something tangible dealing with the quality of life.*
- 10) *Today's youth, like those in the time of Joel, want and try to see visions. Perhaps, when we are thinking of how to find and develop worthy projects we can be always mindful of the reality that if "youth cannot see visions, then perhaps they can only dream dreams." The difference is that visions are prophecies and the food for challenging a staid status quo; whereas dreams deal only with what has been; not with what might someday be.*

FOOTNOTES

1. Francis Bacon, Bacon's Essays: Of Youth and Age, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1881.
2. While this project addresses itself mainly to "Self-Learning", we were able to insert important questions regarding volunteering into the survey instrument. We acknowledge with special appreciation the cooperation of Professor Patrick Pendland of the Graduate School of Information Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, who was the leader of the project.
3. See the bibliography: The Mood of American Youth.

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