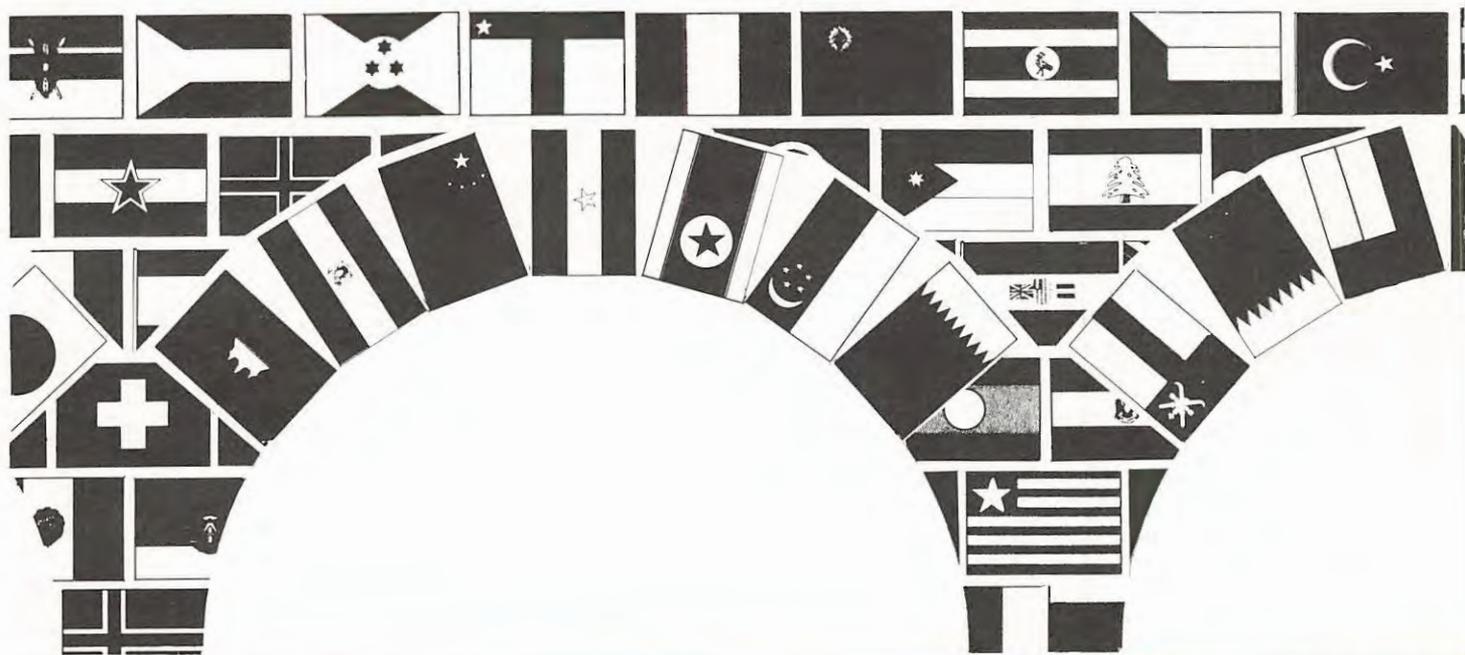


# Building Bridges Through International Voluntarism

## The Volunteer Leader Interview with Mary Ripley, Los Angeles, California



**MARY RIPLEY BEGAN HER** volunteer career more than 30 years ago in the Junior League of Los Angeles. With an interest in child welfare, she conducted a survey of foster homes as her first community project. Her deep involvement in that field eventually led to membership on the board of the Child Welfare League of America, the national standard-setting board for children's services. Today, she serves as first vice president of the Children's Home Society of California as well as the Family Service Association of Los Angeles.

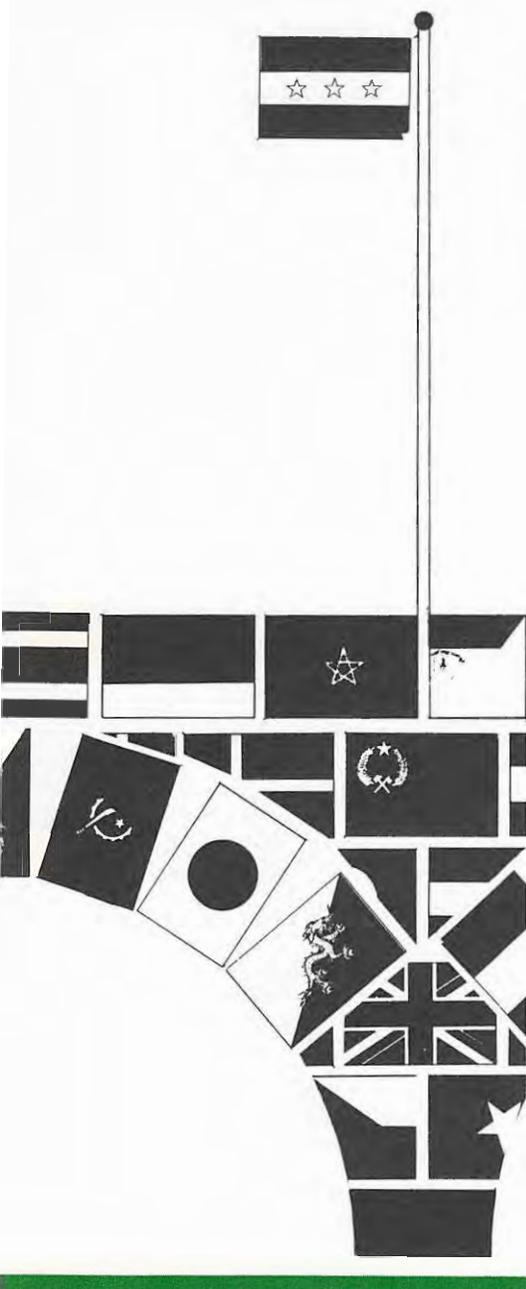
Ripley's credentials in the volunteer field, however, stretch way beyond the realm of child advocacy. She's a past president of the Junior League of Los Angeles and was the first nonprofessional president of the Association of Volunteer Bureaus (AVB). When the Nixon Administration began putting together its idea for a national center for volunteer service, Ripley was invited to participate in the planning sessions.

"I was involved with AVB at the time," she recalled recently, "and I was very excited about the concept of a national volunteer center. I felt strongly about this new opportunity and hoped we could build one strong national organization on voluntar-

ism."

Soon after, she became one of the first presidentially appointed members of the board of the National Center for Voluntary Action (NCVA). And ten years later, when talks began on a merger of NCVA with the National Information Center on Volunteerism, she was one of three NCVA board members to serve on the Joint Committee on Merger. Today, she is acting president of the new organization, VOLUNTEER: The National Center for Citizen Involvement. But even that does not complete the picture of her activities as a volunteer leader.

She talks of her immediate "family of volunteers"—a son who joined the



*Peace Corps, working on community development in Peru, a husband whose community involvement extended to the child welfare, mental health and family service fields. And she has a lot to say about another family—a growing international network of volunteer leaders. “I think at the present time my main interest is having the whole international scene for voluntarism really looked at,” she says, “and seeing what role we in VOLUNTEER can play in that realm.”*

*Ripley served as the first president of the International Association for Volunteer Education, an organization whose inspiration, growth and activities are the subject of our fourth Volunteer Leader Interview.*

**For the past decade, you’ve been dividing your energies between organized voluntarism in this country and the less developed international volunteer scene. What prompted you to broaden your horizon in the volunteer world?**

In 1970 Eleanor Wasson, chairwoman of volunteers at UCLA, had attended an international conference in Canada that focused on volunteers working with cancer patients. She came home with the feeling that there ought to be a more broadly focused international conference—one that would bring together volunteer leaders in many fields from different nations to increase international awareness and build bridges of understanding.

So she came to some of us in Los Angeles and asked us to help her put together such a conference. The conference was called LIVE, which stands for Learn through International Volunteer Effort. Approximately 27 countries were represented at that first gathering in 1970 in Los Angeles.

**And an organization formed as a result of that gathering?**

The organization kind of got started at the same time we were planning the conference. It’s called the International Association for Volunteer Education (IAVE). I had agreed to be president, and I think that began my interest in international voluntarism. It was a very exciting time for all of us involved to see people from other cultures sharing, listening and working together.

**More conferences followed?**

Yes. There was one in Manila in 1972, and the third one—a small one—was held in Nairobi in 1974. Then in 1976 we celebrated the bicentennial of this country by having a representative conference in San Francisco. Participants from the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Israel, along with western world representatives, came together where the United Nations was born to build bridges of understanding through voluntarism. The last conference was in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1978, and this year we meet in Lausanne, Switzerland.

**What happens at these conferences? Are they organized around different themes?**

The theme in general is always

improving the quality of life through international voluntarism, but the basis of the conferences is a sharing of information. In other words, we—the planners and the umbrella agency (IAVE)—feel that the best way to build international bridges through voluntarism is to bring people together to share experiences and have an opportunity to exchange programs, views, and ideas.

That is the major thing to come out of this kind of conference—for us to sit around tables in small workshops and share experiences. The other part is to spend a lot of time seeing how programs work in various countries. So when we go to Turkey or Switzerland we have an opportunity to see what volunteers are doing in those particular countries.

There are tours, agency visits and program demonstrations. Another exciting opportunity is, if possible, to live in homes so that we can see what the family life is like. At our conference in San Francisco and the one in Los Angeles, the whole emphasis was on how we could learn together in different kinds of settings. It worked very well.

**What are some of the kinds of exchanges that took place at these meetings?**

Well, I think a perfect example comes from the two conferences that took place in this country in 1970 and 1976. They were attended by representatives from Israel and Egypt—two countries on the global scene that were almost at war at the time. But when they came together through voluntarism there was a sense of sharing and peaceful understanding.

In 1976 the delegate from Egypt reported at the end of the conference that she realized the important thing was not just to build bridges, but to understand that you have to learn to cross these bridges. And she used the example of how she had become a good friend of the two delegates from Israel.

Another example is that some of the developing countries, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, have had delegates at two or three of these conferences, where they were able to share information about the needs of their countries and how they were being met by volunteers. It made all of us more sensitive to the problems of developing countries.

### **Did you get a sense of what voluntarism was like in their countries?**

Oh, yes. In their interpretation of what they are doing, they are facing terribly serious day-to-day living problems. The delegate from Ethiopia, at one of the earlier conferences, reported how she could see the influence the queen, Haile Selassie's wife, and their daughters had on the volunteer system in that country. After the king was overthrown, the delegate had to leave her country and go to Egypt. There was no volunteer system left in Ethiopia.

You hear the same thing from Portugal—that when the government changed it had a specific and dramatic effect on the ability of people to be volunteers. The letter we had from our good friend in Afghanistan when her government was overthrown indicated very specifically that there was no longer any opportunity to be a volunteer.

So what I'm saying is that one of the impacts of international voluntarism is that it is an example of a truly democratic process. And it was very dramatic when these people would stand up and say we can no longer be volunteers because of the change in our government.

### **So, when volunteering was popular and allowed . . .**

It flourished.

### **Did these countries have state-run volunteer programs or did they just serve a promotional role?**

Both. Government-run, state-run, promotional, and acceptance by government. But when the government changed hands, often the volunteer programs were no longer allowed.

### **What about the IAVE organization? Does it exist mainly to support these conferences?**

Our major function really is to encourage international voluntarism. We always urge the local community or country to do its own conference planning and programming within the guidelines set up by IAVE. We have very simple but specific requirements. One is that the conference has to be a sharing one. It is not just a time for speakers and lectures. We are not going to Switzerland, for instance, only to hear about all the volunteer programs in that country. That's a part of it, but that is not the primary purpose. It is for us to come

together, learn about Bangladesh, learn about France, learn about South America, and so on. So the purpose of this organization is to create and stimulate an international membership and network.

### **How many members do you have?**

Right now our membership stands at about 300 people representing approximately 40 countries. In this context of developing a worldwide membership to share information and exchange ideas at conferences, there already have been some fruitful results.

### **Such as?**

Germaine Vernaison came from Lyons, France, to attend our first conference in 1970. She came under a State Department arrangement we had at the time which sponsored about 18 of our delegates. She spoke no English, so she had an escort who translated for her. Even though all the sessions were in English, she was so enthusiastic about what she learned, she went back to Lyons and set up a local Voluntary Action Center there. Then she saw that kind of activity spread not only throughout her own country, but also throughout the Common Market countries. Now there is a center for voluntary action for these countries of western Europe which Germaine Vernaison heads up. The group sponsors national and international conferences. There is also a volunteer clearinghouse in Paris.

But getting back to building our membership. We are constantly concerned with building coalitions with such groups as NGOs (nongovernmental organizations). We met recently with Caroline Long, one of VOLUNTEER's board members, on the possibility of working with Transcentury, a consultant firm that focuses its efforts on social and economic issues of the developing world. We've been talking with the Agency for International Development, and we'll be working with ACTION, the Association of Junior Leagues, Worldwide YWCA, Red Cross and other organizations with international programs.

### **What about VOLUNTEER?**

VOLUNTEER, as a supporting national organization, is helping with this coalition-building process. I think we need to increase our ability to develop materials—newsletters,

magazines, brochures of all kinds in different languages that would be geared to the international volunteer. And I would hope that VOLUNTEER could have this major responsibility. IAVE would be involved with feeding VOLUNTEER information we receive through our international network.

And that brings me to another one of our goals—the identification of resources. By that I mean the resources we have as an organization within our own membership. For example, we have people in our organization who are experts in planned parenthood or who have great expertise in working with elderly. We have people who have a great deal of experience working with children in day care centers, developing educational programs, running school volunteer programs. So what IAVE wants to identify are those resources and share them through our international network.

One of the things we've been talking about is how we can act as a catalyst to put, for example, people in Egypt who are experts in planned parenthood and the use of volunteers in touch with people in another country who need to know how to set up such a program.

So we'd like to be the force for bringing together these individuals to build a solid volunteer program. It could spread in many different ways. What we have to do is look at what resources we have. At the same time, we have to find out what these people out there want to know. What are they interested in learning about? What kinds of materials do they want? What are they willing to share with others?

### **Can't they pick that up at the conferences?**

They can, but what we heard in Turkey and in San Francisco is that they want more than just a biennial conference. They want a continuing linkage. They are almost like sponges. They are crying for materials on a much more regular basis. It gives us a tremendous opportunity to find out what they want and to develop a resource network, an international skills bank.

That is the current status of our efforts—to build cooperation among leaders in the international volunteer field. And one of our major goals for 1980 is to develop an active network of support organizations to achieve this goal.