

Readers Speak Out on Mass Media's Portrayal of Volunteers

In the last issue of VAL, Susan Ellis wrote a Communications Workshop column on "The Mass Media Image of Volunteers." At the end of her article, we asked readers to send us clippings or a note describing other image examples they had seen on TV, in the movies, a magazine or newspaper. As a result of the response, we are able to begin the dialogue in this issue. We hope to run more letters and clippings in future issues as an ongoing reminder of how others see us.

Carol Gerstein, Community Education Specialist, Westchester Association for Retarded Citizens, White Plains, New York:

I enjoyed Susan Ellis's article about the mass media image of volunteers in your fall issue and agree most wholeheartedly with her sense of

frustration over comic commercials and TV shows that portray volunteers in a foolish and inaccurate way.

I think it's important, however, to make a distinction between the kinds of programs that portray volunteers in an inaccurate manner and movies like "Coming Home" that I believe make an honest attempt to show a volunteer situation in a realistic way. I disagree with Ms. Ellis's perception that Jane Fonda was "assignmentless and not much help to anyone."

I think one very important aspect of a volunteer's role is the ability to act as an advocate in the community for the agencies served. If you will recall, this is exactly what happened when the character portrayed by Ms. Fonda, appalled by the conditions she encountered at the Veterans Hospital where she was a volunteer, struggled to improve things by soliciting help from other ser-

vicemen's wives. That she was unsuccessful in no way diminishes her efforts to make a difference.

The fact that as Ms. Ellis notes, Jane Fonda desired to become a volunteer at the Veterans Hospital "to fill her lonely days" is not a cause for denigration. All volunteers have needs and all volunteer jobs are designed to fill needs. Who is to say whether the person who takes a volunteer position to gain insight into possible career development has a more important reason for volunteering than the person who is lonely and needs to fill her days.

Marylee Boyd, Director of Volunteer Services, Ohio Valley Medical Center, Wheeling, West Virginia.

Caught the premier of "House Calls" on CBS on December 17. The portrayal of an insipid, dumb, do-gooder volunteer did not help us at all.

SMALL SOCIETY





The tensions between mother and daughter are almost unbearable when Cheryl Ladd (r.) visits daughter Nicole Eggert (l.) in a child crisis center while volunteer worker Judy Keirn (center) looks on in "When She Was Bad . . .," the ABC Sunday Night Movie last November 25.

Frances M. Gitelman, Director, Volunteer Services, Jewish Home and Hospital for Aged, New York, N.Y.:

WCBS-TV in the New York metropolitan area should be congratulated for a sensitive tribute to the elderly volunteers at The Jewish Home and Hospital for Aged in Manhattan. "Real Life," a program dedicated to what's great and marvelous about New York and its people, devoted one segment of its opening show to these volunteers and the quiet dignity and warmth they bring to our residents.

The average age of the residents is 87; the average age of the volunteers is 75. We have 80 RSVP volunteers, the oldest of whom is 89. Their hours at The Home are staggering! Our residents rely on them and they, the sustainers, are sustained by the work they do here.

Although the pitch at the end of the

show by host Huell Howser was for this facility, it was easy to picture someone sitting at home, watching, saying, "Look at the fun those volunteers have. I must do that some place, too." We hope that happened!

You're right! We need more such shows to help people answer for themselves the question, "What are you doing the rest of your life?" TV is the best medium to communicate to the public that their needs can meet ours and be met by ours.

Marian Fielder, Assistant Chief, Office of Citizen Involvement, Texas Department of Human Resources, Austin, Texas:

In response to Sue Ellis's article on the mass media image of volunteers, I want to point out the excellent portrayal of a volunteer in "When She Was Bad" starring Cheryl Ladd.

This was a movie on child abuse with a very atypical volunteer (in the traditional sense). She was the crucial person in changing the behavior of the abusive parent (portrayed by Cheryl Ladd). She was real and there when needed. I hope it was clear that she was a volunteer, although it was stated only once. The role she played closely followed that of volunteers in parent aide programs.

The station and producer (whom I do not remember) should be commended for this program. It got very mixed reviews. Our local reviewer liked it, but it had already been panned by a national reviewer. Evidently the viewing audience was very low. It was suggested this was due to serious subject matter which the public is not interested in viewing. Also, it was competing with another popular film, "Oh God" (John Denver and George Burns).

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