

A healthy solution to the pressing need for hospital volunteers is to involve

# THE VOLUNTEER PROFESSIONAL

By Jean Barth

**F**IVE YEARS AGO, AT CLEVELAND Metropolitan General Hospital, volunteer Joann Ruffing and psychiatric social worker Anita Silverstein began an experiment. Starting with the premise that when you look better, you feel better, they embraced a common goal—to demonstrate personal grooming techniques to improve the attitudes of clients in the Department of Psychiatry outpatient clinic towards themselves and their appearance. At the same time, they wanted participants to develop interpersonal relationships through the medium of group therapy.

Four years ago, volunteer Jane Amata, a professional horticulturalist, and psychiatric social worker Linda Stojkov, tried a similar experiment. Using creativity with plants, they developed a program where clients share ideas, successes and failures in plant care to learn more about themselves, attain better feelings, and relate better to others.

Joann and Jane are examples of today's volunteers, who want to use their hard-earned skills in challenging positions. Most of the volunteer sector has long recognized this and adopted the position that community service should benefit

those who donate their time as well as those who receive it. Yet, in the health-care field, where cost containment reigns king and staffs and programs shrink accordingly, we continue to wring our hands over the loss of what we thought was the traditional volunteer—the middle-aged, middle-class,

unemployed, well-educated Lady Bountiful, who is eager to devote time to "socially acceptable" but undemanding volunteer work.

As a hospital volunteer director in Ohio for the past nine years, I've been privileged to be a part of some of the changes in volunteer status and performance which are taking place. I've found that the effective use of people with proven talents and specific expertise offers new and exciting opportunities to fill gaps in institutional staff, rounding out and enriching human services. Far from being too busy, the volunteer professional responds to challenging assignments with warm enthusiasm and becomes a valued addition to staff—provided there is a specific well-

volunteering. She had applied elsewhere but interviews always concluded with offers of routine volunteer assignments having little or no relation to her professional background. I too was puzzled. How could we use a professional grooming expert in the health-care setting?

Begging her patience, I first placed Joann in the surgery waiting room as a hostess to provide companionship and reassurance to the relatives and friends of surgical patients. Then one day I asked her to conduct a workshop on grooming for our younger volunteers. A social worker with our group psychiatric unit attended and recognized how women in her group suffering depression and low self-esteem might benefit

from Joann's expertise. It was the beginning of "A Better Me," a continuing program that has helped hundreds of depressed women.

There were many barriers to be crossed before we could call the program a success. Physicians were skeptical. Joann had no psychological training and no medical background. Although she was eager to work with mentally disturbed patients, she was apprehensive. It was necessary to provide her with rigorous training, teaching her to set exact guidelines, goals and methods of evaluation. Debriefing sessions were arranged between Joann and Anita Silverstein, the group social worker, after all class periods.

Today, Joann conducts her classes without staff present. Clients tell her

**"Volunteering brings me back to reality and helps me achieve a balance in my life."** —Jane Amata (center)



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defined role to play.

Joann Ruffing came to me five years ago, interested in using her skills as a model and charm school director in

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things they won't tell their doctors or social workers, thereby providing additional insights into the clients' concerns. The class atmosphere is informal and friendly. "The most important thing is to keep a sense of humor and let them have a good time," she says. "Hopefully, these women will realize it's all right to look at yourself and spend time on yourself." Joann explained that depressed people gain weight, don't sleep and almost always let personal grooming slip. "After I finished showing one woman skin care," she recalled, "she had tears in her eyes."

After two years of instilling confidence and self-worth in her clients, Joann sat down with another professional model to make plans to practice what she preached. Together they organized a business which uses their unique talents. "At the hospital," she said, "I have learned management skills—how to write a proposal, how to be taken seriously in drawing up plans of action, how to interact with people and to be sensitive to their needs. And I've learned how to project a good image."

She is currently partner of G&R Associates, a three-year old, thriving concern that conducts personal development courses for employees of local corporations. She and her partner promote the concept that individuals gain self-confidence by projecting a successful image. Recently, G&R obtained a contract to develop image workshops for patients of a private mental hospital. The partners also provide coordination for fashion shows at some of Cleveland's larger shopping malls.

"Fashion coordinating is a pressure business," says Joann. "Store owners, like patients, want your undivided attention. Some patients can be manipulative, but it's up to me to set limitations. I've had to learn to do that in my business also."

Joann recruited Jane Amata into the ranks of Cleveland Metropolitan's volunteer corps. Another entrepreneur, Jane started her own plantscaping business (Jungles by Jane, Inc.) at the age of 22.

Jane too was hesitant about working with mentally disturbed patients. But after sitting in on "A Better Me" classes for six weeks, she realized that her impressions about psychiatric patients had been formed more from movies than reality.

Now she works with handicapped and

depressed men and women. One woman in her group had been seeing a physician for five years. "This woman picked up colors in flower arranging as if she'd been trained to do it," Jane said. "She finally told me she'd painted for ten years but had given it up because she didn't feel good enough about herself to paint." Her doctor, who was surprised to learn that she had both interest and training in art, has since guided her into art therapy classes.

**"I have learned how to interact with people and to be sensitive to their needs."**

—Joann Ruffing (left)



When Jane began "The Ivy League," there was no money budgeted for supplies. She brought in scraps from her business, collected flowers from funeral directors, and used tin cans for flower pots, a practice her patients found reassuring. Now her entire budget comes from periodic plant sales at the hospital, which feature the arrangements of psychiatric patients.

Goals are tailored to the individual needs of the clients. With the help of

psychiatric social worker Linda Stojkov, they evaluate needs and backgrounds and then decide on structured activities. "Through these activities, we hope to improve socialization, raise self-esteem, and bring to the surface hidden talent, and Jane says. "I hope to give each person the opportunity to express themselves creatively. Most of the time, patients are very surprised to find they have a lot to offer!"

Patients learn both to "dig their problems into the ground" and to reach out to others. Last Christmas, Jane brought in a small tree for which she and her students made ornaments. When they donated it to the staff Christmas party, the class felt pride because they could give something back to those who had helped them.

Jane, like Joann, has learned skills which have aided her in business. "I know how to deal with people more effectively now," she says.

For both women, volunteering is a way to renew themselves. "Most of the time, I'm business-oriented," Jane says, "which at times diverts my attention from things that are most important in life. Volunteering brings me back to reality and helps me achieve a balance."

Recognition that volunteers, too, have needs is an integral part of the success of these two patient programs. Willingness to enter into a mutual partnership where the individual skills of each professional complement those of the staff provides a dynamic opportunity for expanded service to clients. These volunteers have designed, implemented, and evaluated their contributions to treatment and have realized personal satisfaction in the process.

Personal growth is evident in their own lives. Not only have stimulating new avenues of endeavor emerged in their respective careers, but they have broadened their horizons with each new hospital patient group. In turn, professional staff have gained a new appreciation of the opportunities afforded by working with these volunteer professionals.

We have entered a prolonged period of limitations on staff and program expansion due to budgetary constraints which will require innovative means to extend patient services. Utilization of the volunteer professional offers a significant opportunity to overcome these obstacles and enhance treatment programs. ♥