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## Remembering Susan J. Ellis

By [Energize Team](#)

March  
2019

With sadness we share the news that our president, colleague and friend, Susan J. Ellis, passed away February 24, 2019, after successfully living with cancer for over eight years.

Besides founding our company, Energize, Inc. in 1977, Susan was a compelling force in bringing awareness to the power of volunteering; the effective management of volunteer involvement in organizations; and, even more dear to her heart, the importance of substantive support for volunteer engagement strategy from organizations' administrators, executive directors, CEOs, and boards of directors.

Susan was a vibrant speaker and presenter. Many of her quotes are shared among leaders and professionals in volunteer involvement and individuals dedicated to volunteering. To share a few, she has been heard saying:

- *Volunteering is so pervasive it's invisible. We take for granted all the things that have been pioneered by concerned, active volunteers.*
- *Men have always volunteered, they just called themselves coaches, trustees, and firemen!*
- *Paul Revere earned his living as a silversmith. But what do we remember him for? His volunteer work. All activism is volunteering in that it's done above and beyond earning a living and deals with what people really care passionately about. Remember, no one gets paid to rebel. All revolutions start with volunteers.*



We know Susan inspired and influenced many wherever she traveled to speak on volunteer involvement or train organizations on volunteer management strategy. Susan's vibrant and strong personality also leaves us with many memories about how she touched us personally.

We would love to hear how Susan made a difference in your organizations, professional development, or perspective on volunteering. Please share these thoughts or any Susan quotes on this page in the comments below.

Additional resources about Susan and her life's work:

- Information about the [Susan J. Ellis Foundation](#).
- Susan's [obituary tribute](#) from colleagues and friends.
- A Tribute to Susan J. Ellis by Andy Fryar.
- [Susan Ellis Matters](#) by Jayne Cravens.
- The Philadelphia Inquirer obituary: [Susan J. Ellis, 70, internationally known expert in volunteer management](#).
- The NonProfit Times obituary: [Volunteer Management Advocate Susan J. Ellis Dies](#).
- The Wall Street Journal obituary: [Susan Ellis Advised Organizations on How to Manage Their Volunteers](#)

A Virtual Tribute to Susan J. Ellis has been organized by friends and colleagues to bring people together and celebrate her life and legacy. AL!VE ( [Association of Leaders in Volunteer Engagement](#)) has generously offered their "webinar room" via Zoom for the gathering. See details below:

Sunday, March 10 - 2 PM Eastern Daylight Time

Zoom webinar room: <https://zoom.us/j/125108305>

Meeting ID: 125 108 305

## Comments from Readers

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*Submitted on February 25th, 2019*

*Dale Gellatly, Special Project Volunteer Coordinator , Hospice Wellington , Guelph, Ontario , Canada*

I am so sad to hear that Susan has passed away. I have learned from and been inspired by her since the beginning of my career in volunteer management in the '70's. My favourite quote from her, which I frequently use when I speak about volunteering is "Volunteering is inherently an optimistic activity. No one volunteers for a cause they assume is hopeless. So the very act of participation implies a dream: this problem can be solved, this cause can succeed, this effort can make a difference." I am so grateful for everything I learned from Susan.

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*Submitted on February 25th, 2019*

*Sybil F. Stershic, Quality Service Marketing, Alburdis, United States*

Such a loss! But such a legacy she left in helping so many nonprofits. We'll miss you, Susan.

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*Submitted on February 25th, 2019*

*Sheryl Parker, Director, Strategic Volunteer Engagement, UJA Federation of New York, New York, United States*

I had the great privilege of being seated next to Susan at conference dinner in 2017. I must admit to being a bit starstruck when we were introduced given I'd been hearing about her work and reading her writings for years. Not only was she gracious, she was smart and incredibly funny -- and that dinner stands out as one of most inspiring conference experiences of my life. My only regret is that we did not have the opportunity to work together more closely. What a loss for our community. May her memory be for a blessing.

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*Submitted on February 25th, 2019*

*Ruth Millard, President 2018-current, Volunteer Management Professionals of Canada, Ontario, Canada*

So sorry for the loss to the field and all who treasure Susan. As a long time volunteer and then moving into volunteer management in 2010, Susan and Energize have always been a resource and inspiration to me in my work and volunteering... my go-to place when I needed information or perspective on a topic. Always practical, always real and in the know. Susan words that echo for me and carry me in the future are "volunteering is so pervasive it's invisible. We take for granted all the things that have been pioneered by concerned active volunteers." Your time and contributions to the volunteerism and the field will always be visible.

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*Submitted on February 25th, 2019*

*Yael Caplin, Jerusalem, Israel*

I have known Susan for almost 20 years. Beyond what has been written about her, I think maybe her most prominent trait was that she was not afraid to share: her knowledge and years of experience with people that may be perceived as the "competition". On the contrary, she cultivated the next generation into the world of volunteer development and management. Like bringing Rob Jackson as co editor of e-Volunteerism and working with Andy Fryer on the other side of the world. Using technology and creativity to forge partnerships all over the globe. This is what set her apart from most people in this profession.

Whenever I needed advice she was always there at the other end of a SKYPE line.

She understood that when you give you get a lot more in return. I am not talking about volunteering, I am talking about really and truly sharing. With this mindset she managed to create a business in a field that most people, even today, cannot really understand it outside the immediate world of volunteering. I hope this will be her legacy – working together to promote everyone and not just each person looking out for their own turf.

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*Submitted on February 25th, 2019*

*Gail Irwin, Former Manager Member Services, Volunteer Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada*

Susan was a true leader in Volunteer Management. She is leaving an amazing legacy. It was an honor to meet her and in my position at Volunteer Calgary I was always confident in recommending her valuable and practical resources to both new and seasoned leaders in the field.

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*Submitted on February 25th, 2019*

*Michael Fliess, Co-author, Measuring the Impact of Volunteers, A Balanced and Strategic Approach , Ontario, Canada*

Early in my career I discovered Susan Ellis and the Energize Inc. site. I very quickly became a Susan Ellis fan making frequent trips to the site for Susan's monthly hot topics as well as many other resources she authored or curated. I was thrilled to train with Susan when she was invited to a number of the PAVRO conferences in Ontario. I loved that Susan consistently challenged those of us working in the volunteer sector, to think outside the box, to be innovative and most importantly to advocate for the thoughtful engagement of volunteers and our profession. And always with an amazing energy and good sense of humor. On one of her trips to Ontario, four colleagues and I pitched an idea to Susan for a book. We were thrilled when she said, "send me the manuscript." It was pretty rough at that point so we scrambled to refine it further, and off it went to Susan. Although it needed a lot of work, Susan believed in the idea and this began a long distance communication as she guided us in taking what was a rough manuscript to a finished book. What a gift and privilege it was to work with Susan. She was a great mentor to me as I know she has been to countless colleagues across the world. She leaves an extraordinary legacy of propelling our sector and profession forward. Susan, you will be greatly missed.

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*Submitted on February 25th, 2019*

*Rustie Brooke, Founder and Director, The New York City Committee, United Nations International Year of Volunteers 2001, New York, New York, United States*

Susan was a great woman and celebrated teacher whose life added purpose, insight, laughter, strength, intelligence, determination and humanism to our world. Gone but never forgotten,

she is missed. It was an honor to have known her.

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*Submitted on February 25th, 2019*

*William Henry, Volunteers Insurance Service, Woodbridge Virginia, USA*

If there is a volunteerism Mount Rushmore, Susan is surely on it. I'm privileged to have known her. As others have pointed out, she was a great sharer of her experience, knowledge and resources, and an eager innovator. Sometimes it seemed as if Susan had, on her schedule, to contact everyone she knew from time to time to offer something useful, or extend an invitation to get involved in something new. She is an inspiration.

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*Submitted on February 26th, 2019*

*DJ Cronin, Brisbane, Australia*

I have been following Susan J Ellis for years through her blogs, books and workshops. I am sure I have read every Hot Topic she has written. Susan was and is loved here in Australia and I had the honour of meeting Susan on a few occasions. Susan was so supportive to me when I first started blogging on Volunteer Management. I remember once a Skype call I made to Susan when I needed advice on a professional difficulty I was having. I got my times mixed up and Susan was just about to take herself to bed in the USA when I called. Nevertheless she spent the next 2 hours talking to me. This was the type of woman she was - always there for her colleagues, always inspiring us, always willing us to be the best we could be. RIP Susan. You will be dearly missed.

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*Submitted on February 26th, 2019*

*Josh Fixler, Rabbi, Congregation Emanu El, Houston, United States*

I shared this on Facebook, but I'll share it here too:

I just learned the devastating news of the passing of Susan J. Ellis. She was a great teacher, a visionary, but most of all a friend. I want to share with you a few of my Susan stories you won't hear from other people.

Susan was a colleague of my mother's Jill Friedman Fixler. She was a pioneer in the field of Volunteer Engagement. Early in my mother's own journey in that field, Susan came to Denver for a conference and she stayed with us. I think this was when I was in early middle school. My mother was excited for this one-on-one time with a giant in her field, an opportunity both to learn and also to start to have Susan notice her and maybe help her launch her next steps (I am guessing this was before the JFFixler Group was even a dream). Somewhere though, about halfway through the visit, on a walk to a lake by our house with me and my parents, she discovered that I was almost as obsessed with Star Trek as she was. Susan was an epic Trekkie.

She had named her company Energize Inc. as an homage to her favorite captain. We were instantly friends, and I'm not sure my mom got a word in edgewise the rest of the visit. But that was Susan's way. She befriended a nerdy, weird 12 year old and treated him like a grown up she could have real conversations with. She took me seriously and she welcomed me into her heart.

From that point on, whenever Susan was in town she visited my mom AND me. On one visit a few years later, she learned that I had acquired a Star Trek cookbook. She insisted that we make and drink Klingon Bloodwine together. Some people will remember Susan presenting or training. Others will remember her at a booth selling books or leading an online course. I will always remember her toasting and saying Qapla'. I don't know if it was still there now, but in 2007 she mentioned to me in an e-mail that she had our picture of that night on her refrigerator. Because, in reading back through her e-mails to me tonight, she almost always mentions that memory. It's only a little embarrassing, because often those are emails about me to other colleagues. But her joy in that memory still fills me with pride.

Reading back through those e-mails is also a reminder that time and again Susan reached out and tried to help me find my way. One of the first places I was ever published was in her online journal, e-Volunteerism (<https://www.e-volunteerism.com/quarter.../09jul/09jul-training>) and all because Susan was eager to publish the work of a 25 year old who was new in the field. I have her notes on my article where she encouraged me but also pushed me to do better. Once again, I can see Susan taking me seriously and helping me to find myself.

A few years ago, I was in a class on Human Resource Management at NYU Wagner with Professor Erica G. Foldy. The syllabus said that on the week we were to study Volunteer Engagement, we had been assigned to read selections from Susan's pivotal book, *From the Top Down: The Executive Role in Volunteer Program Success*. While I was a little sad we were not reading something by my mom, I was thrilled that we would learn from Susan's field-changing work. I asked Professor Foldy if she would be interested in having Susan as a guest presenter over skype, and of course she was ecstatic. So I reached out to Susan and she said she'd be delighted to do it. It was then that she shared with me that she was on her "Medical Magical Mystery Tour," as she called it. She was in the midst of treatment and she didn't think it would affect her presentation but she wanted me to know. But of course, nothing could slow her down. Not the cancer, not the technical difficulties we experienced that night. She was as compelling as ever. My classmates listened with rapt attention. Did she embarrass me by bringing up the blood wine? Of course! But did she take seriously the opportunity to impart wisdom to a random group of non-profit management systems? Of course that too. This was only about a year after my mom died, and somehow, having Susan do the presentation that normally I would have asked mom to do was just perfect. She talked about how the field had changed and how she was continuing to push us to think and grow. She answered questions thoughtfully. What might have otherwise been just another topic in a whirlwind of a course suddenly became a highlight, and a whole group of students got to understand what I already

knew, that volunteerism and volunteer engagement are fields that non-profit professionals need to take seriously.

So this is the Susan that I will remember. A woman who always took me seriously. A woman who worked tirelessly her whole adult life to make sure the field of Volunteer Engagement was taken seriously, making room for a myriad of other people like my mother to find their own voices and contributions too. But a woman who was never took herself so seriously that she couldn't throw back a few glasses of Blood Wine.

So Susan, my teacher, my friend. I don't know if today is a good day to die, as the klingons say, but I know you lived the life of a powerful klingon warrior. As the klingon poet says, "For just as mere life is not victory, Mere death is not defeat." Yours was a victorious and honorable life. May wherever you find yourself now, be it life everlasting or Sto-vo-kor be full of blessings. I hope you and my mom have found each other there. Maybe now she'll finally get your undivided attention for a few minutes, before you go off to Energize some angels into volunteering.

zikhronah livrakha - may your memory be for a blessing.

Qapla'

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*Submitted on February 26th, 2019*

*Crystal Hickerson, Volunteer Manager, Great Lakes Caring Hospice, Detroit, MI, United States*

So very sorry to hear this. Sympathies to her family and loved ones. She did so much for our profession with resources of every kind that is needed. Such a legacy! Rest in Peace. Your voice was felt by so many in your lifetime.

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*Submitted on February 26th, 2019*

*Jay Haapala, Associate State Director, AARP MN, St. Paul, MN, USA*

Rest in peace, Susan. I don't think there was much time for that when you were with us. Thanks for a lifetime of leadership and service, which of course is multiplied by all the people you influenced in life and with your legacy.

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*Submitted on February 26th, 2019*

*Marcia Hale, Program Director, Human Services Council/Volunteer Connections-RSVP, Vancouver, WA, United States*

Susan has been on my mind a lot lately as I had been preparing a presentation on volunteer staff relations. I had spent the better part of Thursday and Friday last week on the

Energizeinc. website reading so many insightful columns and chuckling over some of Susan's thoughts on the profession, as I often echoed her frustrations. She was one of my first teachers in this field when I got started kind of by accident back in the early 90's. She was a constant during the days of AVA and I attended every workshop she presented. I left the field for a time but still continued to read her columns and remember after one column where she was talking about volunteer managers still not having a seat at the table consistently, I sent her a quick comment. I told her that I had left the field for a while and was sad to see we were still struggling with the same issues. She wrote me back and even seemed to remember me a little bit. I am so grateful for her words of wisdom, her books, her teachings, but most of all for reminding me that I wasn't alone in this field! Without AVA, I have felt adrift at times now that I've returned to volunteer management, but I always knew I could find the support I needed with Energizeinc. I will miss her so much and am grateful that we will always have her wisdom in print form. I feel so lucky to have attended her workshops and to know her even a little bit. I always felt she had wrapped her arms around this profession to lovingly and fiercely shepherd us through our journeys. She will "live long and prosper" as we all continue to develop and guide the best possible volunteer programs all across our globe.

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*Submitted on February 26th, 2019*

*Sam Fankuchen, Founder & CEO, Golden, Los Angeles, United States*

I was lucky and honored to work with Susan on an article in her volunteering journal. She spent several weeks iterating with me on structural edits and philosophical musings for a piece most other editors might have passively approved a first draft. A leader in vision and practice, she continuously inspired many operators of strong social programs. Rest in peace, Susan.

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*Submitted on March 2nd, 2019*

*Scott C. Stevenson, Managing Editor, John Wiley & Sons, Marion, US*

For decades Susan has been the go-to authority for volunteerism and volunteer management practices. She will be sorely missed.

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*Submitted on March 5th, 2019*

*Carole Kriebel, Ms, Trinity Lutheran Church (retired), Lansdale, PA, USA*

I met Susan in 1982 when she taught a course on Volunteer Administration for Penn State. I had just started working at Trinity Lutheran Church in Lansdale, PA as a "volunteer" Volunteer Coordinator. This temporary position evolved into Director Position lasting 22 years. I loved every minute of it. Susan's impact on me was tremendous...she was a teacher and mentor. She



helped me to meld volunteer principles with the religious landscape, which was at times no easy task. She encouraged me to write and to lead workshops.

I have been retired for 15 years, but often have been asked for advice on working with volunteers. As recently as January, I shared her work again.

I am so sorry for this loss to the community of Volunteerism. Susan changed my life just I'm sure she changed others to numerous to count.

Thank you for this opportunity to share.

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*Submitted on March 5th, 2019*

*Don Rhodes, Employers' Advocate, Don Rhodes & Associates Limited, Central Otago, New Zealand*

I quite selfishly took information/ articles off your website to share with my Employer clients, much of which usually included Topic of the month. I found Susan's information/recommendations/suggestions particularly practical as they related to Employers, as opposed to heaps of stuff from similar organisations particularly in your part of the world where Employers are oftentimes held to be almost the "enemy". For this reason alone I shall miss this obviously talented lady. God Bless Ma'am.

Don Rhodes. New Zealand.

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*Submitted on March 6th, 2019*

*Gerald (Jerry) ..., Presenter and Blogger, independent contractor, New York, NY, United States*

When I made my intentional career change in 1993, I didn't know about Susan Ellis. However, I soon learned about her via colleagues, and her workshops, books, and monthly Hot Topics (that I would eventually look forward to and often respond to – we didn't always agree LOL).

I cannot remember if I first saw her at an AVA International Conferences or when local professional associations brought her to NYC during my early years in the profession. I saw her several times and was inspired and educated by her. I started buying her books – I have many of them on my shelves. Her passion and advocacy is what attracted me to her. Back in those days we were still educating ourselves about the profession. Yes, before the Internet, webinars, podcasts, Zoom, etc.

It must have been at an AVA International Conference around 1999 when Susan approached me to be part of a Keyboard Round Table article for a "new online publication" she was launching. It would allow participants to respond, much like her Hot Topics. I participated in 2000 on, Part I -Do We Need New Models for DOVIA'S?, and in 2001 on, Part II – Models for Wider Collaboration. Susan was always encouraging me to think about writing an article. I

would later co-author an article on Peer Career Coaching in 2012 with a colleague and friend. In 2018, I was invited to write an article and worked with her amazing team of editors. The topic was, “[Working With the LGBTQIA Community: Diversity Within the Community](#)”.

When I started doing workshops, I often quoted Susan and would refer to her books, Energize Inc. website, her monthly Hot Topics, etc. The summer of 2006, I co-taught a class at CUNY (City University of New York) for future leadership of non-profits. Yes, Susan was quoted and her books referenced. The past seven years I’ve served as co-instructor for a two-day course produced by NYAVA (New York Association for Volunteer Administration), Principles and Practices of Volunteer Program Management, and Susan’s many contributions to the field are included.

The summer of 2010, Susan was going to be in NYC for I believe the Points of Light conference and a preconference session (that I attended). She asked me to check out some site options in the city for something she wanted to do during the conference. As a Thank You gesture she gave me a signed copy of the fully revised 3rd edition of, [From The Top Down](#). I had the second printing from 1990 initially and the fully revised edition from 1996 – the one that is most dog-eared and full of post-its.

I have two last “in person” memories of Susan. The summer of 2014, NYSAVSA (New York State Association of Volunteer Services Administrators) had their annual state conference and Susan presented. I remember having dinner with her one evening and she did what she had always done – she challenged me with regard to a rocky patch I was having with a job at the time! She made me think and be better. After dinner we walked to see the Niagara Falls, enjoyed the lovely evening view of them, and then walked back to the hotel together.

The last time I saw Susan was at the 2017 National Summit on Volunteer Engagement Leadership. Our last conversation was after the post summit discussion (where she had been her smart and lively “pushing the envelope” self). Our conversation was at a specially arranged happy hour. The two of us sat at a table and just talked. Susan the guru I looked up to, who I didn’t always agree with, was so easy to have a conversation with. Susan, I miss you already.

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*Submitted on March 8th, 2019*

*Cathryn Richards, Volunteer Engagement Center Program Coordinator, Department of Economic Security, Phoenix, AZ*

There are only a handful of individuals that we can legitimately refer to as true Titans in the field of Volunteer Management. Susan was one of these. My memories of her are of a little dynamo, and someone not to be messed with when it came to her passion for volunteer engagement. I'm truly thankful that I had the opportunity to meet her and absorb some of her knowledge over the years. Her passing leaves a noticeable void in the world of volunteerism;

however, she has prepared many to step up and fill the gap now that she's gone. Thank you for your love of service, dear Susan. We will miss you and remember you always. Much love.

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*Submitted on March 15th, 2019*

*Kayla Young, Volunteer Coordinator, Alberta, Canada*

Susan's work inspires me endlessly, I am so sad to hear of her passing. Energize Inc. has been my go to over the past five years working professionally in Volunteer Management and our entire team enjoys reading the monthly hot topic, and accessing the [A-Z resource library](#). We often discuss one topic at our monthly meetings from Energize Inc. My first article that was ever published in my life was thanks to and supported by Susan and published in [e-Volunteerism](#). Susan called me personally to let me know it was going to be published and I couldn't believe it. I can't describe how much it means to someone whose never had something published before, to have someone believe in you like that and stand behind the value of the message you wanted to share, that's Susan for you. She was so incredibly positive, warm, and supportive speaking to me over the phone to let me know "[Standing up for the Potential of Others](#)" was going to be published. Susan brought so many gifts to the field and so much knowledge and advocacy. What a stellar amazing human being. Thank you so much for your life long commitment to your work. Sending so much love to you, your family, your friends, your colleagues during such a hard time. Your legacy lives on forever. Much love.

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*Submitted on March 19th, 2019*

*Joscelyn Lampman, Bay Area, United States*

I had the privilege to meet Susan at the beginning of her career when she worked as a trainer with ACTION, the federal agency on volunteerism. (VISTA, Foster Grandparent Program, Retired Senior Volunteer Program, etc.) Susan was a remarkable trainer and she inspired me to continue working in the area of community organizing and with volunteers to make the world a better place. When I worked as a VISTA Supervisor Susan came to Pittsburgh and did a training with my staff. Not only was she knowledgeable but each person left the training as I did, inspired and able to see the power that volunteers can bring to an organization. A few years latter I worked for ACTION as a Regional Training Director and I continued to use her training plans. Susan was a visionary, smart, kind and full of energy. Thank you Susan for what you have given to make the world a better place.

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PRIVACY STATEMENT

