

cover story

Air Force Personnel
Enlist in Local Communities

Volunteer

By Sarah J. Schmidt

Duty

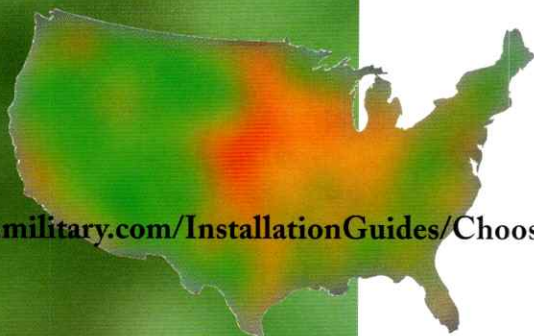


Military personnel assigned to Columbus (Miss.) Air Force Base participate in a variety of volunteer projects including home building for Habitat for Humanity and food collection and delivery for local charities.



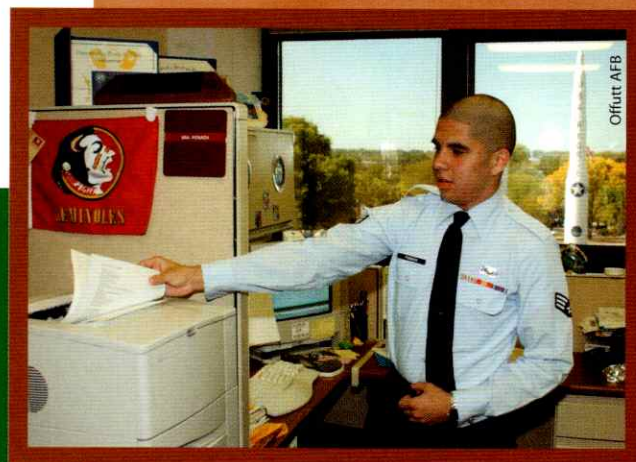
Ruben Gonzalez strikes an imposing figure in camouflage uniform and combat boots. With 17 years active duty in the United States Air Force, this career master sergeant handles firearms with ease, dons chemical warfare gear without hesitation, and knows the names of hostile places that aren't even on the map. He also builds playgrounds, judges science fairs, organizes toy drives and sits on the board of a scholarship pageant.

Unusual? Not at all, says Gonzalez, whose volunteer activities add diversity to his military life. "As a military citizen, we normally get involved on and off base," Gonzalez says. "The Air Force develops the whole person, so what we do in our jobs matters, but what we do in our communities matters too." In his current assignment at Randolph Air Force Base, Gonzalez volunteers at the Red Cross, United Way, Fiesta Scholarship Pageant and local elementary schools. ➔



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Senior Airman Greg Posada first learned about volunteer opportunities through the base chapel at Offutt AFB, Neb. Wherever he's assigned, Posada says, "There's always somebody who needs help. That's why I try to pitch in."



Jackie Mercer-Hollie and Master Sergeant Ruben Gonzalez visit hospitals as part of their volunteer service as Randolph AFB Volunteer Ambassadors.

Talent & Energy

Hundreds of Air Force members like Gonzalez volunteer each year, says Sandra Nichols, volunteer resource manager at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio. Military bases offer an exceptionally talented and energetic pool of volunteers. "People look to the military as security," Nichols explains, "so volunteer-based organiza-

tions tend to welcome military members." Last year, more than 1,500 active duty personnel from Randolph volunteered in San Antonio and surrounding communities, logging more than 225,000 work hours.

Those numbers represent extraordinary levels of volunteerism occurring at virtually all military installations, says Joyce Seibel, at the Air Force Headquarters Personnel Center. In fact, volunteerism has become such an important professional outlet for Air Force personnel that new guidelines, scheduled for publication next year, give greater focus to active duty volunteer endeavors, she says.

Master Sergeant Ivory Baker,

Tips for Recruiting Military Volunteers

Military personnel make great volunteers, but working through the maze of government bureaucracy to find and maintain good contacts can be daunting. Here are tips for easy recruiting:

★ **Start at the top** — The first place to call at any military installation is the Public Affairs Office. If there's not one, then call the commander's office and ask for the person assigned to handle public affairs. He or she should be able to connect you with the person who coordinates all the base volunteer efforts. Ask how that installation handles requests for volunteers. Some may want written requests; others may accept a phone call.

★ **Don't overlook military families** — Most military bases host a facility called the Family Support Center (or some similar title), which employs at least one volunteer resource manager. This person coordinates volunteer opportunities for all the military personnel and their families assigned to that base and will be your best contact for recruiting volunteers on a regular basis. Contact the installation's main switchboard for phone numbers.

★ **Getting the word out** — Once you've established the right contact, communicate your volunteer opportunities well in advance of anticipated needs. Two to three weeks seems reasonable; earlier if you need many volunteers. If you rely on military volunteers for annual events, ask the volunteer resource manager to check the base calendar for conflicts before you schedule the event each year.

★ **Geographic limitations** — Charitable organizations that operate within driving distance of military installations stand the best chance of recruiting volunteers from among the personnel assigned there. There's no geographic limitation, per se, but volunteer coordinators at the installations interviewed said they had the best response to projects that were no further than 30 to 50 miles from the installation. If you're not that close, don't be deterred from making contact, but be prepared to address the distance issue with plans for car pools, flexible hours or other accommodations.

★ **Establish a partnership** — Work toward developing long-term relationships with your contacts at the military installation. Meet with commanders, add military contacts to your mailing list and include a military representative or liaison among your advisors. Promote your charitable mission by including brochures or other "freebies" in newcomer's packets that the base sends to incoming personnel. Ask if the installation gives a newcomer's orientation, and if so, offer to speak on behalf of your organization. You may not recruit instant volunteers among the newcomers, but your efforts will help form a partnership that will produce lasting rewards for your organization and the military community.

— Sarah J. Schmidt

executive to the Command Chaplain at U.S. Strategic Command, credits a lot of it to geography. "Because military personnel move to new assignments every few years, they're not locked into a geographic mind set," he explains. "A lot of us have deployed to places like Haiti and Cuba where we've seen really bad conditions. It's made us more sensitive to what we have at home, and it's motivated us to help build better communities where we can."

Team Builder

Besides building better communities, volunteering also builds teamwork, which translates into better job performance, says Technical Sergeant

Stephen Bachant of Columbus Air Force Base, Miss. Bachant coordinates an all-military building project through the local Habitat for Humanity. He first worked with Habitat last year when he volunteered with some military buddies. This year, they decided to take on an entire house.

The project is being built completely with volunteer labor from military members at Columbus Air Force Base. USAA sponsored the project with \$35,000. Bachant organizes about 12 workers on Saturdays from August to February, when the house is scheduled for completion. Every squadron on base commits to work: Security Forces takes one

Saturday; the Med Group gets a Saturday; the Comm Squadron gets the next Saturday, and so on.

One weekend, volunteers from the Airmen Leadership School were assigned to work. They were mostly young airmen, many serving their first assignment. They all showed up precisely on time and worked so hard that they finished by 10:30 that morning. Their supervisor rushed to pick up more building materials just to keep them busy until lunch, laughs Bachant.

It's that kind of work ethic and genuine dedication that makes military volunteers so attractive to community organizations. "People in the military have been instilled



Left, volunteers from Randolph AFB work on the foundation for a Habitat for Humanity house in San Antonio. Right, Capt. James Taylor of U.S. Strategic Command greets athletes at the Nebraska Special Olympics.

with the goal of leaving a place better than they found it. Building a Habitat house is one great way to do that," Bachant believes. "What our effort says is that this Air Force base cares about the community just as much as it cares about our own military families," Bachant says.

Mobile Volunteers

Jackie Hager, executive director of the Columbus Habitat for Humanity, thinks the military volunteers are great promoters. "Many come here already familiar with Habitat, and they carry that knowledge and experience on to their next assignment. They're taking the mission of Habitat with them and helping other people every time they move," she explains.

Where some organizations might shy away from volunteers who frequently move or deploy for months at a time, Hager says it's been a plus for Habitat. "We don't worry about overworking our military volunteers because there's always a steady turnover," she says. "That's one of the great things about military volunteers. Every time somebody

gets reassigned or deploys, someone else just steps in."

Marv Bush, director of training for Special Olympics Nebraska, agrees. His organization relies on nearly 500 volunteers from U.S. Strategic Command and Offutt Air Force Base every year. "The last few years, there was a military exercise going on that conflicted with our games, so we lost some of our regular volunteers. But those who were here just picked up double duty and everything ran smoothly," he says.

Other organizations find ways to accommodate military schedules. Big Brothers/Big Sisters in San Antonio depends on nearly 100 Air Force members from nearby bases to mentor children. When any of those mentors deploy, they stay in touch with their Little Brother/Sister with postcards and e-mail, says Denise Pruett, a BBBSA vice president. "It's a great learning experience for the Little Brothers and Sisters because they get to learn about the country or locale where their mentor is serving," she says.

Senior Airman Allison Martin is one of those mentors. She's matched with a 10-year-old girl, whose mother

is a Reservist. "After Sept. 11, her mom was called up to active duty, so I felt an even greater sense of responsibility for mentoring during her mom's absence," Martin recalls.

Why Volunteer?

Despite the demands of military duties, the men and women of our nation's fighting forces also make up a critical component of our volunteer forces. Finding the time or the motivation to volunteer isn't an issue. "When you see what other people are going through, it makes you grateful for what you have. It's just a great feeling to help someone, no matter where you are," says Senior Airman Greg Posada of U.S. Strategic Command. The same feeling probably motivated these outstanding citizens to join the military in the first place—and will continue into many volunteer missions yet to come. ♦

Attorney Sarah J. Schmidt is the editor of a monthly legal newsletter, the Nonprofit Alert, published by the Virginia law firm of Gammon & Grange, P.C. She is a frequent contributor to Volunteer Leadership.