

THE NEWEST TREND IN VOLUNTEERING MAY SURPRISE YOU

By Kim Smith, director, Volunteer Services, Overlake Hospital Medical Center

Who is the face of volunteering? You may think it's the young adult exploring his or her career interests by volunteering at an animal shelter, or a child selling lemonade to raise money for a class field trip. You may think typical volunteers are retirees using time to explore a field they didn't get a chance to experience during their careers. Or, you may think it's the woman at church organizing the next social, or at the PTA meeting setting up a tutoring program. Who is the typical volunteer in America? It's all of them! According to the United States Department of Labor, more than one in four Americans volunteered in 2006, spanning all age groups. What is surprising is the most likely volunteers are those between the ages of 35 to 54. In this age range, three out of 10 individuals spent time in the last year volunteering. Studies also show it is not only those who are out of the workforce who contribute time. In fact, those who work outside the home are more likely to volunteer than those who do not.

Volunteers make a significant contribution. According to the Department of Labor study, the median time spent volunteering was an hour a week. That hour may seem like a modest amount, but it adds up quickly for organizations that depend on a volunteer workforce. It is not only smaller charities that are volunteer-dependent. If you are a parent, it is likely that your child's school depends on your and other parents' volunteer work for the operation of vital programs and activities. Larger organizations like hospitals rely heavily on volunteers. At Overlake Hospital Medical Center, volunteers contribute significantly to our patient-care teams on units and in waiting rooms, making sure patients' and families' needs are met. They serve in a variety of roles in almost every area of the hospital.

One of the valuable roles volunteers fill in an organization is fundraising. In fact, this was the most common way Americans volunteered in 2006. fundraising comprises not only direct appeals for money, but also there are many other interesting

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projects that contribute to the bottom line. According to Muffie Signalness, director of the Auxiliaries for the Overlake Foundation, there are traditional projects like the poinsettia sale every winter, but there are also creative events such as Perfect Settings where tables are decorated omanely by theme and then guests vote for a favorite. It speaks to the varied roles available for those interested in volunteering that fundraising only represents 10 percent of the work volunteers do for the groups and agencies they serve.

So, even if you are not interested in helping with the financial side of things, there is plenty of work for you to do within organizations. Tasks include tutoring and coaching, as well as office help, fine arts performance and counseling.

As many people move further along in their lives and careers, they may feel a need for an outlet for their energies outside the pressures of work and home. Volunteering can be a great way to expand your horizons, as you focus efforts on a field outside your expertise. If you work in accounting, perhaps you would enjoy flexing your creative side by assisting with decorations for a fundraising event. Likewise, if you are more of a creative type, volunteer organizations may have opportunities for you to grow in other ways. The nature of volunteering means there are often many separate tasks to be done, and multiple people involved in the organization can pitch in and try something new within the group. Many organizations will have opportunities for someone to be on the front lines interacting with clients or customers, but there are equally important jobs behind the scenes that keep the entity running, and this may be the role you prefer.

Whichever role you gravitate to, volunteering is an excellent way to

make and meet new acquaintances. Many volunteer organizations are friendly groups, where shared interests serve as an icebreaker toward the formation of new friendships. You may even find your volunteer group will meet for extracurricular activities. Many of the Auxiliaries at Overlake meet for social occasions as well as for their fundraising work. The Auxiliaries are very social organizations, where members tend to become good friends over time as they work on their fundraising projects.

Volunteering can be a good way for teens to explore their career interests and find out more about fields they would not have exposure to otherwise. Many of the volunteers in hospitals are exploring their career interests, and finding out more about medicine. Some may be required to volunteer by their school, or it may be a requirement of a particular career program they are applying for. Beginning with volunteering at an early age sets the stage for a lifetime of enjoyment of the rich rewards of volunteering.

Some individuals have had great success starting a new volunteer organizations. For example, Overlake was founded by a group of volunteers who saw a need in their community and rose to meet it through their fundraising efforts. You certainly do not have to aim as big as starting a new hospital; perhaps there is another need in your area is not being met and your efforts can help. There may be an area in an existing organization that could use more help. One of Overlake's Auxiliaries, the Stork Club, was founded by a new mother who wanted to support the hospital unit that had helped her.

To find the right volunteer niche, matching sites on the Internet are another valuable resource. These sites can help you find an organization around a particular issue or area of focus, or you may inquire directly if there is an organization that already interests you.

Whatever your approach to finding a satisfying volunteer job is, the rewards are many.