

The Art of Volunteering

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We make a living by what we do,
but we make a life by what we give.
- Winston Churchill

It wasn't until I started my current job, that I began to think more about volunteers and the act of volunteering. I support two programs at the UNH Cooperative Extension office in Grafton County: 4-H Youth Development and the Master Gardener programs. Both programs rely on a core of volunteers, and part of my job is to get, find, and keep these

volunteers. This responsibility has led me to some wonderful people and to lots of questions. Why do people volunteer? Why *don't* people volunteer? Who is most likely to volunteer? Why do they do it?

At first I suspected that, like so many other inherited and learned characteristics, the tendency to volunteer (or not to) came from our family. The first family I thought of, however, disregarded this linear notion; my grandparents did volunteer and my parents did not. My own attitude towards volunteering is somewhere between my grandmother's, who considered volunteering a necessary part of life, and my mother's who felt so consumed with the necessities of life that committing to anything additional was inconceivable. As a volunteer coordinator, I find myself straddling two roles—I am both the person trying to convince you to volunteer, and the person who knows she does not volunteer enough.

People volunteer because they want to make a difference. People continue to volunteer because they feel that they *are* making a difference. If you are trying to muster up the enthusiasm to volunteer, be sure to choose something that matters to you. For inspiration pay attention to the things in the world that you find infuriating. Tired of misspelled advertisements? Become a literacy volunteer. Exasperated about cornfields becoming condos? Join a land conservation group or a local foods movement. Worried that today's children watch too much television? Help out with 4-H Youth Development or the local after-school program in your area. Volunteering is a positive way for us to change what we don't like about the world.

I know we sometimes feel too busy, too financially strapped, and too overwhelmed to willingly add one more item to our list. I also know, on the volunteer management end of things, that organizations are happy for any kind of help. If you are too busy to become a full fledged 4-H leader then help out with a 6 hour 4-H Special Project on a topic of your choice. If you are too busy to do a 6 hour project, then attend the fair as a judge for baked goods, or be a gardening mentor to a 4-H gardener next summer.

In some ways, volunteering is the ideal work. It is not something we have to do, but rather something we choose to do. Volunteering is about quality, not quantity, and fulfillment and purpose are the earned wages.

For more information on 4-H and Master Gardener volunteers please call the office at (603)787-6944 or visit us on the web at <http://extension.unh.edu/Counties/Grafton/Grafton.htm>