

Another Rant: What Hasn't Changed*

Linda L. Graff

LINDA GRAFF AND ASSOCIATES INC.

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I am shamelessly using the Macduff/Bunt 21st anniversary as a springboard to launch an observation from my own 25 years in the business of volunteer management, but this observation is not about what has changed over these many years. Rather the aim of this wee commentary is to rant on about what hasn't changed ... that should have.

When I began my career as the Director of the Volunteer Centre in Hamilton, Canada early in 1980, it became obvious fairly soon that I had entered a field that ranked low in many hierarchies. For example, the Volunteer Centre was the "lowest" program of all programs delivered by its parent organization, the Social Planning and Research Council. The board was largely uninterested in what we did; the funders were largely uninterested in what we did, and made us fight for our very survival every year. We weren't alone. Witness the failure of many volunteer centres over the last 20 years despite the ever-growing reliance on volunteers in community services.

"The community," with the exception of managers of volunteers with whom we worked directly, was largely uninterested in what we did at the Volunteer Centre. And despite the fact that Mayors in communities across my country, and I suspect elsewhere, are fond of bragging that their city is "the best in the country" with respect to civic engagement, community spirit and volunteer participation, the truth is that municipal officials - elected and otherwise - have very little understanding of the breadth or depth of voluntary action and as a consequence, give it little to no consideration. Provincial and federal politicians are really no different. Whenever their attention happens to be captured, they typically view volunteering as a cause to create yet another silly awards program that generates great photo opportunities for politicians, but contributes very little to a supportive infrastructure for voluntary action.

This is all in spite of the fact that communities as we know them would not exist without volunteers and the infrastructures that supports it. Community life as we know it would disappear without volunteering. Literally. Without volunteering our cities would be wastelands, devoid of nearly all that is humane:

- recreational, education, and health services would be pared to the bone and many would simply die off

- the arts and cultural dimensions of community that enrich our lives and our spirits would surely fail to exist
- faith communities would wither
- disaster services would be skeletal at best, non-existent at worst
- the political system would fail without all those volunteers who organize fundraisers for their candidates and put those annoying signs on our lawns
- self-help organizations would, by definition, cease to exist
- there would never be another parade and no one would ever experience the joy of a church choir

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The irony is that the place that volunteering is most invisible is at the top levels of the very organizations in which it takes place. Boards, senior administrators and many staff have virtually no idea of what volunteers really do. They do not really understand the work of volunteers or the essential contributions they actually make. Volunteers are still seen as “fluff” - as menial workers doing menial work. Managers of volunteers are still found at the bottom of organizational hierarchies; last hired, first fired, receiving the least pay of all managers and generally dead-ended in positions that lead nowhere.

Most board members and senior staff would be stunned to find out the extent to which their organizations’ very existence (through volunteer fundraising and public relations), their programming (through direct provision of service by volunteers), and their governance (by volunteer board members) are fully reliant on the ongoing participation of volunteers who show up day after day, week after week, once again in spite of the pernicious neglect with which they are treated by those very same agency executives. Oh sure, there are exceptions, but be honest. The exceptions are in such a small minority that they just serve to illustrate the scale of vision impairment that characterizes the vast majority of their sister organizations.

And, after 25 years in “the biz,” this is the one thing that I see that has remained virtually constant, despite all of the profound changes that have reshaped our sense of community and the human service delivery systems on this continent.

How can this be, I ask myself, year after year. Surely this will be the year that real change begins, I think to myself. And year after year it’s business as usual.

It is this failure to understand the precious resource that volunteering represents that I find most frustrating about this truly wonderful career I have had in the field. And it is this very same failure that I find is driving me to be more political, more outspoken, and more outrageous as each year passes. I am less interested in doing workshops on recruitment and way more interested in stirring pots and rattling cages. Maybe it's my age, or maybe it's that as I approach the latter part of my career, I feel less threatened by the consequences of kicking butt at every opportunity.

So I ask you to forgive me if I use Nancy and Floyd's 21st anniversary at Macduff/Bunt to rant on about what hasn't changed, instead of celebrating the joy and vigour of volunteering and the success of their business. And please forgive me, too, for closing on the negative note of this caution: if we all - and I mean all (the lead organizations and peak bodies, the professional associations at all levels, the practitioners, volunteer centres) - don't start to get a bit more strategic and a bit more political and a bit more assertive about elevating social and political consciousness about volunteering and its indispensability to our beloved way of life, I truly fear that in a very short time we will witness the decline of voluntary action. We will find ourselves in wasted communities, stunned, looking around us and wondering what happened to destroy the volunteering spirit that has sustained us for so long. For the sake of all that's good in our communities, sharpen your elbows and do your part to make change happen.