

Linda Graff On the Future of Volunteering

An Interview by Lynda Robertson

Linda Graff, internationally renowned expert on volunteering and volunteerism is scheduled to speak in Calgary and Edmonton at the end of February. Lynda Robertson from the Resource Centre for Voluntary Organizations at Grant MacEwan College caught up with Linda and asked her to talk about some of the new issues she will cover in her workshops and some of her thoughts on the future of volunteering here in Canada.

Lynda R: You're coming back to Calgary and Edmonton soon.

Linda G: Yes, I'm happy to report I'll be in Calgary on February 26 and 27, and in Edmonton on February 28 and 29 of this year. I always enjoy working in Alberta. There is no other province in this country that supports volunteerism like you do in Alberta. And it shows. There's a very high level of competence and expertise among managers of volunteers in Alberta communities so it's always a pleasure to train out there. I'm also excited about that engagement because Volunteer Calgary (www.volunteercalgary.ab.ca) and Volunteer Edmonton, who are sponsoring the events (www.volunteeredmonton.com), are giving me the opportunity to present some new sessions and that's always interesting and fun.

Lynda R: Tell us about some of the sessions you have planned.

Linda G: Sure. It will be a full agenda in both cities on this tour as in each location I'm doing four half day sessions in the span of two days. Lots of material, and three of the four sessions are new.

The first session planned for the first morning in each city is on "boundaries" for volunteer programs.

Lynda R: What's that about?

Linda G: This is a topic that has evolved for me out of my many years of work in risk management, and I think it is one of the most important topics in volunteer program management these days.

As we ask volunteers to take on increasingly complex, responsible work, and as we ask them to work with and connect directly with clients (students, residents, patients, participants, consumers ... whatever they happen to be called in any specific setting), questions about the "edges" of the work become more difficult to discern. For example, how far should a volunteer go to be helpful? How friendly is acceptable, and where's the line between friendly and being a friend. And is it okay for the volunteer to cross that line? And if so, how far? Similar questions arise regarding what is in and what is outside of the position description. One of my associates has been doing workshops for volunteers on this topic for a number of years and what we've found is that volunteers almost always think it's acceptable to "go further" than their organization would feel comfortable with. Interestingly, I'm finding very few organizations have paid attention to this matter of boundaries and the workshop is always really interesting and provocative. It's also usually a lot of fun as we play with what is okay and not okay. It gives participants lots of food for thought as they go back to their organizations and begin to explore where boundaries are needed in their own programs.

Lynda R: Tell us about some of your other sessions.

Linda G: The two sessions which will be delivered on the second day - February 27 in Calgary and February 29 in Edmonton - are closely related. The first deals with how volunteer programs can be modified to make them more attractive to baby boomers. There's an interesting thing happening right at the moment. I think there is a great deal of hope in the voluntary sector that baby boomers will move into volunteering in large numbers as they move close to and into retirement. The problem is that there is evidence which suggests exactly the opposite.

Lynda R: That's a disturbing message!

Linda G: Yes. What we're seeing is that there is a very close connection between participation in volunteering and one's life cycle stage. So, for example, volunteering rates are quite high among older adolescents. Those rates decline a great deal among people in their early 20's. Rates increase again through the thirties and forties, and stay high into the early 50's. However, at about age 55, participation in volunteering begins to decline. This is counter-intuitive, I know. We would normally think that people would increase their volunteering as they approach their retirement years and as their "free time" increases. But it just isn't so. And, the decline in participation drops even more dramatically at about age 65.

What's important about this is two things. First, this life cycle-linked participation pattern is replicated repeatedly in surveys in Canada and elsewhere. So it's a pretty solid fact. These patterns reflect what people usually do. Second, because we have such a large bulge of people just approaching that magic point where participation starts to drop off - and by the way, they are the people who have been volunteering in fairly large numbers through their 30's, 40's, and early 50's - even a small decline among such a large group of people would have a very significant impact. And this comes at a time when nonprofit organizations are already reporting increasingly serious volunteer shortages, shortages that are significant enough to have an impact on capacity to deliver services. Compound these facts with the certainty that many boomers will in the not-too-distant future transition from volunteer service providers to service users, and the potential magnitude of the problem begins to reveal itself.

Interestingly, there is a growing interest in boomer volunteers. In the last few months at least half a dozen research reports and papers on the topic have crossed my desk. Underlying much of the current "buzz" is a presumption that boomer volunteers will just keep volunteering. Indeed, many are thinking boomer participation in volunteering will increase because, after all, they're about to step into all of this extra time, right? And they may. But I doubt it. If they follow well documented and widespread historical patterns, just the opposite may be in our future.

Lynda R: So what's to be done?

Linda G: Well, that's the question, isn't it? There is no single answer, of course. And without getting into the full range of the discussions that Paul Reed (Senior Social Scientist at Statistics Canada) and I have been presenting in our Canada Who Cares? initiative, I think we need concerted action on a number of fronts. As I've been calling for for more than two decades, Canada and Canadians need to start paying attention to volunteering. Volunteering needs support. It needs help. From

governments, from funders, from the private sector, from communities and community leaders. Without a broad-brush approach, it will be difficult to lure boomers into, or *back* into, volunteering.

There's another response though, that is more the topic of this workshop in Edmonton, and that has to do with how organizations will need to adjust their conceptions of what volunteers can do for them. What we can be pretty certain about is that the majority of boomers won't be attracted to long-term or ongoing positions. They'll want freedom and flexibility. They'll want short term jobs that are productive, meaningful and rewarding. They will not want to do the maintenance and administrative work that veteran era volunteers have sustained over the last three decades. Sure there will be exceptions, but I think nonprofits are making a big mistake if they think they will continue to be able to run their branches and chapters and fundraising appeals by volunteer labour alone. That work is just not appealing to younger volunteers.

In the Edmonton session we'll talk about all the ways that volunteer programs and volunteer positions might need to be adjusted to make them attractive to the approaching boomers. And we'll also look at how organizations will have to adjust as well. It's not just about tinkering with existing positions. I think these soon-to-be upon us trends will demand some fundamental rethinking about how to engage all of our human resources, paid and unpaid, to best achieve our missions.

Lynda R: You said the other workshop was linked to this one?

Linda G: Yes, the last session scheduled on the second day in each city is a very new one that I've delivered only twice before - once in San Antonio and once in England this fall, both times to very positive response. This is new material on how we may need to go beyond shifts in position design if we are to attract volunteers in the future. When we look at the preferences and limitations of not only baby boomers, but of Gen Xers and Gen Vs and even younger volunteers, what we see is a very different ethic from the long civic generation, many of whom were driven by a sense of civic duty and a genuine caring for the common good. I think what we see in younger volunteers, including boomers, is possible pursuit of volunteering, not out of duty, but as an opportunity. The basis if the volunteer relationship is no longer "giving" but rather, "exchange". My sense is that most volunteers now want something back from volunteering. And they are more likely to volunteer to produce amenities and services than they are to simply help someone else.

But there's more going on as well. Boomers are highly skilled, better educated, more demanding, more picky. They're used to having their own way and exercising their influence and not-inconsequential power. They are more likely to want to tell you how to run your program than to quietly take orders or do your work as you say just *because* you say. They will demand a different *management style* from us. I'm still working out a good deal of what this might actually mean as it plays out on the ground, but, for example, I'm thinking we may need to break down or at least modify some of the rules and bureaucracy we've spent the last two decades building.

Lynda R: There's a bit of irony in that kind of message coming from you, isn't there?

Linda G: Yes, the irony hasn't been lot on me! I've spent the better part of 30 years admonishing managers of volunteers to get more serious about their volunteer program management systems and infrastructure. My workshops and writing have been about developing management systems to manage risks and ensure quality programming. Now I'm on about rethinking some of that and

looking for ways that heavy handed bureaucracy might be modified to make it more palatable and less of an obstacle to new groups of volunteers who are as likely to just go around us if we put too many obstacles in their way.

And interestingly, there's an Edmonton agency that has had a good deal of influence on my thinking in this direction. I can't mention them here without their permission, but perhaps I can persuade them to join us when I'm there and have them share some of the very concrete and hugely successful modifications they have made to their screening and integration systems to make them less cumbersome for volunteers. The results they've had are staggering.

That's a quick overview of the last session. It's a bit more involved than I'm making it out to be, but I think the key point is that it sets out some very new thinking - "musings" might even be a better word - about very new shifts that may be required just around the corner.

Lynda R: Nothing ever stays the same for you, does it?

Linda G: No, that's true. I guess that's why I still love this work after nearly three decades in the business. And there has never been a more exciting time to be in volunteering. There is so much change approaching, here in Canada, and now, around the world that it is impossible to keep up with it all.

Lynda R: You've done a lot of international work in the last few years.

Linda G: Yes, I'm actually spending more time training out of Canada than in, these days. And what's interesting about that is that while I'm learning a tremendous amount about what volunteering looks like in other places around the world, I've learned just as much about volunteering here in North America just by gaining an "outside-in" perspective.

There's so much we take for granted here. Volunteering has always been here for us and the tendency is to assume that it always will be here for us. But if you stop to look at that assumption for just a moment, the fragility of volunteering and the volunteer work force becomes terribly clear. This is something Paul (Reed) and I talk about in the Canada Who Cares? initiative. Despite the fact that volunteers are virtually everywhere, the base, the foundation, of volunteerism is more narrow than most of us realize. To illustrate, 67% of all volunteer work is done by about 5% of the adult Canadian population. This is the 5-6-7 equation I've been talking about lately. It's the "myth of the inverted pyramid". We think volunteering is solid, but in fact, it rests on the shoulders of just a very few "stalwarts" as Paul calls them. And they are not only aging. Most of them are aged. We can expect that they will be moving out of volunteering in quite large numbers over the next few years. That narrow base is getting narrower. That's why it's becoming ever so much more important to study, research, understand, attend to volunteering. We've been taking it for granted. Continuing to do so has the potential to create quite serious consequences.

Lynda R: That's much of what you talk about in the Canada Who Cares? project, isn't it?

Linda G: Yes. People can read more about this and listen to the Graff-Reed conversations via our website at www.CanadaWhoCares.ca

Lynda R: So sum up your thinking for us. Are you worried about the future of volunteering?

Linda G: Absolutely. Now I must immediately confess that I'm a die-hard alarmist. Perhaps that comes from too many years in risk management! But my concern is also buffered by an unparalleled optimism as well.

Lynda R: What do you mean by that?

Linda G: Baby boomers represent the largest repository of skill, knowledge, experience, expertise and influence we have ever seen in this or any other country at one time. As they approach retirement age, they will be making changes in their lives and decisions about their activities and lifestyle. This is the perfect opportunity for us to capture their interest, harness the wealth of their capacity. It is there, idling for us, waiting to see if we'll make the adjustments necessary to gather it together and harness it for the good of our communities. It's a pool of latent caring of unequalled magnitude. I have no doubt that baby boomers and younger volunteers could become caring, concerned, engaged, connected citizens. I still do truly believe in the goodness, decency and generosity of Canadians. But those prospective volunteers could just as easily abandon the common good and head off in a hedonistic frenzy towards international travel, golf courses, and all manner of other personal development opportunities so readily available to them.

The key variable dividing these alternatives, at least in my mind, is how responsive the voluntary sector will be in the next very short while. If organizations continue to offer the same kinds of long term, boring, administrative and low level work that so many have for so long, volunteers will simply go elsewhere. If, on the other hand, organizations are willing to make fundamental shifts in how they think about volunteer work and value volunteer potential, nearly unlimited wealth is open to them. As my friend and colleague Marilyn MacKenzie has said, we need to invite volunteers to become solvers of organizational problems, not just doers of small deeds.

Lynda R: Do you think organizations are able to make the transitions necessary to turn things around?

Linda G: I think they're able. They're just not willing. That's the seat of my pessimism. I see very little evidence of senior management - CEOs or boards - paying any attention at all to volunteering. In fact, despite the fact that I speak with thousands of managers of volunteers every year, I'd be hard pressed to name half a dozen organizations in this country that are really understanding the magnitude of what's afoot and beginning their transitions now. And now is when the change has to happen. Waiting even four or five years will, I think, put us behind. We'll lose the veteran era volunteers, and the time that it will take to recover from their exodus and rethink and rebuild volunteer involvement opportunities and infrastructure will take too long. In the interim, vast numbers of prospective volunteers will be turned off, put off, chased off. We're already hearing more and more from volunteers about their negative experiences with ill-equipped organizations. I was a guest on CBC Radio's Cross Country Check Up at the end of December (the podcast is downloadable from the CBC website, by the way, at: <http://www.cbc.ca/checkup/archives07.html>) and I was amazed at the number of callers who spoke about their not-so-great experiences as volunteers and called for organizations to get their acts together with respect to volunteer involvement.

I've been saying for years that our capacity to recruit volunteers has outpaced our organizations' capacities to effectively engage volunteer involvement. The truth of that claim seems to be evident

“on the street”. There’s no one in this country who would like me to be wrong more than I. I’ve spent my entire career advocating for volunteering and volunteerism. But I just do not see organizations paying any substantive attention to volunteers or volunteering. In that regard, nothing has changed in 30 years.

Lynda R: So, what’s to be done?

Linda G: I wish I had an easy answer. Paul and I have set out some of our initial thinking about this in the Graff-Reed conversations (www.CanadaWhoCares.ca). But it’s a complex matter and it requires action on a number of fronts. I would be delighted to see community leaders pick up on the issues and run with them. I just don’t know the magic words that will make that happen.

Lynda R: Thanks so much for sharing your time and your thoughts with us, Linda. Your message is not a “good news story” but it is certainly one that our communities need to hear and act on.

Reprinted from the Grant MacEwan Resource Centre For Voluntary Organization’s newsletter, *Connections* (Vol 18 No. 3). While some of the content refers to an upcoming workshop series by Graff, most pertains to general shifts currently taking place in volunteering.