



WHO CARES?

*Who Cares?: Shifting Patterns of Community Participation*¹

Audio Track #2, *Canada Who Cares?*

Linda L. Graff and Paul B. Reed

Linda Graff: do you know who's going to feed you or care for you when you're old? If you live in a small community, will you have enough volunteer firefighters? Who will offer an alternative to gang violence and drug use to the youth in your neighbourhood? Who will provide care to your family member who is recovering at home from serious surgery? Who is going to raise the funds for the art gallery your community is dreaming of? For that matter, who's going to raise the money for cancer research, and research into heart disease, arthritis, MS, Diabetes, name any other organ?

The question of *Who Cares?* is a question to which we've traditionally had a pretty comfortable answer. Volunteers are the people who care enough to do all of that work in our communities.

I'm Linda Graff, consultant, author, trainer in the nonprofit sector. And I'm here in conversation with Dr. Paul Reed, professor at Carleton University and director of the Centre for Applied Social Research. As well Paul is senior social scientist at Statistics Canada.

We're talking about volunteering and participating in Canada. Volunteers are broadly and deeply embedded in Canadian society. For example, they are the sandbaggers that save Winnipeg when the Red River floods. Volunteers are the responders to all manner of other emergencies such as avalanches, marine disasters and lost children in wilderness camping areas. They're the backbone of the adult literacy movement in this country. Volunteers provide transportation services to doctors' appointments and cancer treatments. They build housing for low income families. They're on the other end of the phone line for the survivors of sexual assault. Volunteers are the service clubs that raise money for all manner of other organizations and they're the Mothers Against Drunk Driving, who have completely transformed our attitudes about appropriate and responsible behaviour.

Volunteers are everywhere and their work touches all of us. Oddly, they are nearly invisible. We think of the services and amenities and the systems that volunteers provide but we don't actually think about the volunteer foundation upon which those services are built. The result is that volunteers are pervasively taken for granted. They've always been there for us, and we continue to assume that they will always be there for us. Well here's an update: we can no longer be certain that volunteers will be there for us the way they have been there for us in the past. Volunteer invisibility is a serious problem in Canada and volunteers are nothing short of essential to our way of life.

¹ Graff, Linda L. And Paul B Reed. 2007. *Who Cares?: Shifting Patterns of Community Participation*. Audio Track #2 of the Graff- Reed Conversations in the [Canada Who Cares? project](#). Dundas, Ontario: Linda Graff And Associates Inc. Audio file available from: www.CanadaWhoCares.ca

Paul Reed: there's something more, Linda. Volunteering is not only generally invisible and taken for granted in this country, there are growing signs that it's weakening and possibly at risk of declining. Weakening in terms of, first of all, a shift, a slow shift away from committed involvement in particular community organizations on the part of a lot of volunteers toward lot more occasional, short term, episodic volunteering. This of course means there's somewhat less stability in the pool of volunteers that are available.

Secondly, we know that volunteering is distributed quite disproportionately across the population. There's a large number of Canadians who volunteer small amounts of time, and a very small proportion of the population that volunteers very large amounts of time. This we call the "civic core." The civic core is shrinking. The stalwarts, the people at the very heart of volunteering are shrinking. There's also reason to see volunteering's invisibility in part due to the fact that there's been a long civic generation, those people who grew up during the Great Depression, during World War II, people who had a sense of the need to contribute as individuals directly to the good of the community. This long civic generation is passing, it's people who are now into the late years of their lives and for whom volunteering is much less possible.

There's also a shift away from a fundamental commitment to volunteering some particular value or ideal associated with organizations toward volunteers looking for personal payoff or benefit. This means that the kind of volunteering work or activity that they're prepared to accept has to change.

And of course there is the aging of the population, the passing of the baby boom. As volunteers, in particular cohorts, get older they change in their volunteering behaviour. That's going to have an impact and perhaps in the direction of weakening volunteering.

As for declining or the risk of declining volunteers, some figures indicate that volunteering is largely leveled over the last the 10-15 years. On the other hand, some social science evidence indicates there is a longer term decline of perhaps 1-1.5, maybe even 2 per cent in volunteering which of course is pretty small for a year or two, but if it remains like that over a decade you're looking at a decline of perhaps 20 per cent. We would really see that and really feel it. Not only is the extent of volunteering changing, there is shifts in the amounts of time people are putting in with more and more volunteers putting in smaller amounts of time, and small numbers and proportions of volunteers continuing to put in large chunks of time.

Looking at it all together, the evidence suggests that Canadians and their communities face the distinct possibility of changes in volunteering and with that perhaps changes in our quality of personal and community life that we won't like if we fail to perceive what's happening to volunteering, if we fail to understand its implications or neglect to take action.

Linda Graff: you know the risks that you are talking about, Paul, they're interesting because I think when we allow volunteering to enter into our consciousness my sense is that we believe that it's big, it's broad, it's well founded across the population. What's interesting is that that's totally inaccurate.

When we look at the research that you're doing at Statistics Canada about the patterns of volunteering, one of the sharpest pieces of evidence that I pick out of all of the data that you're looking at there is that 67 per cent of all volunteer work in Canada is done by only five per cent of all Canadians. That's a lot of work resting on the shoulders of a very few. So rather than a broad solid robust work force the truth is we've got quite a tiny group of committed Canadians carrying the bulk of the responsibility for services, for caring, and

for the nurturing of community life. That seems to me to be potentially a very fragile work force – and it would seem to me that any factors that look like they may have an impact on that work force need to be watched very carefully.

Paul Reed: the changes are here and happening now in fact. Meals on Wheels, for example, is an organization well known I think to a great many Canadians that takes ready prepared meals to hundreds of people every day, people who can't prepare their own meals easily due to illness or disability or infirmity. Meals on Wheels volunteers in fact provide considerably more than just meals. They give essential social contact and conversation to these people. In one major Canadian city Meals on Wheels has a volunteer deficit of 15–20 per cent and reports it's finding it tougher and tougher to find and keep new volunteers. It's been this way they say for quite some time now. Meanwhile the level of need for Meals on Wheels' essential services continues to rise of course. And in the community where I live the Salvation Army, a well known essential agency in responding to social need of many kinds, likewise laments the serious and growing difficulty in attracting and retaining volunteers. Both these organizations and a great many others report that they are largely dependent on volunteers who are in their 60s, 70s, 80s, volunteers who aren't going to be around much longer. Finding volunteers is only the most serious of a number of stresses that Canada's voluntary organizations are struggling to cope with. So we can see that the voluntary domain and volunteering are invisible, they're taken for granted, and certainly they're fragile.

I might add that as important as volunteering is as a source of crucial services, it's a great deal more than that. It's the means by which Canadians express ideals. It's an essential avenue along which many people connect with others. It provides the means for Canadians to fulfill their need to feel that they can make a difference. In a word, volunteering not only serves utilitarian purposes it provides services, it's a source of connectivity and nourishment for individuals and for those around them. It is to community as a taproot is to a plant, perhaps: both indispensable as an anchor and as a source of vitality. But it's invisible, it's taken for granted and fragile. I believe if we take our time as individuals and communities to respond to the changing face of volunteering there will be consequences. If we take a lot of time to respond I think there will be larger consequences.

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