



WHO CARES?

*Volunteers Are Everywhere – Expect an Impact on Your Life*¹

Audio Track #4, *Canada Who Cares?*

Linda L. Graff and Paul B. Reed

Paul Reed: Look, Linda this is a discussion about volunteers and volunteering. But for busy people, what's the big deal? Why should anyone be taking any of this seriously?

Linda Graff: you're hitting me with the "it's just volunteering line." I think to understand the potential impact of changes in patterns of helping and caring, we need to understand volunteering, its character and its magnitude. I'd argue there's not a single Canadian who isn't touched by volunteering in some meaningful way through the course of their lives. We all know a little bit about some little corner of volunteering when we stop to think about it because maybe we have kids in soccer and we see the coaches. But very, very few of us ever add it all up.

Let me give you some examples and you can stop me when it gets tedious. We've got volunteers in every aspect of community, in every major institution in this country. They're in the school systems, but they're not just working with kids – although they certainly do that – but they're raising money and they're not just raising money for the fluff, the extra trip to the museum, they're actually raising money for text books. We've got volunteers in the health system, the institutional health system, they're in the hospitals for example, but they're also in the communities. They are the lifeblood of Meals on Wheels, they're doing the friendly visiting. The entire hospice movement in the country is built on the backs of volunteers. They're in the political system. Here's an interesting one: who do you think it is that puts up those annoying signs on our lawns during elections? Elections wouldn't happen, politicians wouldn't get elected without volunteers in their campaign. The entire faith community depends on volunteerism to accomplish their ministry. The adult literacy movement is peopled by volunteers. There would be no minor sports in the country without volunteers. Remove the coaches out of minor sports and there is no minor sports. Heritage, culture, arts – who supports the symphonies? Who supports the art galleries? Who does the fundraising for the bricks and mortars? It's all volunteers. Global warming is something that's capturing more attention these days. Where are we going? If you care about global warming where are we going to go in terms of environmental change without Greenpeace, without the Sierra Club, without provincial and national parks in this country? Food banks were started by and maintained by volunteers. United Way, where's United Way without volunteers? And those volunteers raise the money that support all of the other agencies in the community. If you've ever watched a choir, if you've ever watched a parade, if you've ever attended a community barbecue, it's all about volunteering. When you start to add it all up, volunteers are absolutely everywhere in our community.

¹ Graff, Linda L. And Paul B. Reed. 2007. *Volunteers Are Everywhere – Expect an Impact on Your Life*. Audio Track #4 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: if I'm the mayor of Lethbridge or Sault Ste. Marie or Quebec, if I'm the president of the XYZ Manufacturing Company in a city or community, if I'm the head of the local United Way campaign – what does all of this matter to me? Again why, I ask, should we take it seriously, should they take it seriously?

Linda Graff: sure because it's over there, it's just volunteering.

Paul Reed: it's just volunteering.

Linda Graff: I think what we haven't done is made the connection between volunteering as a service and what volunteering contributes to our way of life. If you're the mayor of any town presumably you're concerned about economic development and volunteering contributes directly to economic development by developing community. Volunteers make healthy communities, which attracts employees in an increasingly competitive hiring market. Volunteers create communities that attract development money. But the absence of volunteering, so often it's the case that we don't know what we're got until it's gone, take volunteers out of the community, let us sit back and let it decline and what we're looking at almost certainly is increased homelessness, increased crime, increased school drop out, increased addiction, increased teen pregnancy.

Paul Reed: you're saying that volunteers affect teen pregnancy? Surely this is a little bit of over dramatizing?

Linda Graff: well take volunteers out of Big Brothers and you have no Big Brothers. Take volunteers out of Boys and Girls Clubs. Take volunteers out of the YWCAs and YMCAs. Take volunteers out of Guides and Scouts and of all the other hundreds and thousands of organizations that work with kids and adolescents – the high risk kids and otherwise. You remove that segment of our caring communities and you're absolutely nuts if you can't see that we're going to have an impact on the behavior of children.

Paul Reed: that's actually interesting. I hadn't thought about it that way. What you said a moment ago makes sense. It really is a matter of looking carefully and making connections.

Linda Graff: volunteering is connected and it's not just connected to social issues or justice issues or economic issues or even the corporate field. Volunteering also connects directly to things like safety and security. It connects to civil unrest and without volunteers you are absolutely guaranteed increased social costs and increased health costs. Look, I'm not saying, nor are you, Paul, in your review of trends that we're looking at a future devoid of volunteers. But if we're looking at a pattern of decline – and honestly we're both guessing at how much that's going to be – but all the indicators suggest that it's going to go down rather than up, then we have to understand that our future is a future of reduced services that are provided by volunteers – and these are not just workers in back rooms doing little jobs – these are volunteers now, they're staff, they're unpaid employees who are out there on the front lines working directly with the people we serve. We're looking at fewer amenities, the galleries, the community swimming pools, the orchestra. But we're also looking at a diminished capacity to respond to what is sometimes life and death need. I'm talking about things like disaster response volunteers, I'm talking about volunteers in life saving, the reserve coast guard, firefighting. Volunteers are the backbone of rural community, small community, fire fighting brigades. We're looking at a future where you're going to stand by and watch your house burn because we weren't able to recruit volunteers to that fire department.

Now you can say that's catastrophizing but without action that's the direction in which we're headed. The point is again that we don't very often add it all up and see the whole picture; we just see little bits. And what I'm arguing is that a decline in volunteering, a softening of volunteering is about direct noticeable consequentiality. We run the risk of not noticing until it's virtually gone.

Let me turn it back to you, from the social science perspective, do you think communities can remain healthy if volunteerism and caring decline?

Paul Reed: the clear cut examples that you've been mentioning I find persuasive. I have a different way of thinking about volunteering but I feel just the same as you do that in fact volunteering is essential to healthy communities. In several ways, first of all there is something that we call civic syndrome. We know that people who volunteer have a set of other characteristics that generally go together in a cluster. People who are volunteers, our research has shown over and over again, are people who are extremely oriented to helping their neighbours as simply personal direct helping and caring. They are people who are generous givers in many cases —

Linda Graff: — of money?

Paul Reed: of money, yes. They have a set of social and demographic characteristics that make up a pattern. And if they're volunteering is diminishing, if it's slipping, it may be an indicator, a subtle indicator, of a weakening of this civic syndrome because all of these measures go together.

Another aspect that is likewise somewhat more indirect than the examples you were giving is the importance of interconnections. We might call it social embeddedness. When people are extensively interconnected with others it has a very measurable impact on their health, their mental health, on their inclination to contribute to the communal good. When this social embeddedness, when this interconnections are diminished, there are impacts not only on the lives of those people as individuals but on the community as a whole as well.

It's also very tempting to think of volunteering as fundamentally a service providing activity. It certainly is that and very extensively, but there is another subtle dimension to it; it expresses, it gives embodiment to values, to ideals that are not captured easily in social science, but which are at the very heart of being Canadian, and this expressive facet of volunteering we lose sight of it entirely but engaging in community volunteering gives substance to this ethos that is so very, very important to what we are and how we are as Canadians.

Linda Graff: I'm trying to understand the point here. Are you saying that if we see a decline in volunteering then we will see a decline in this connecting and caring as a way of life. Or is it the other way around? We become less caring for some reason - perhaps some of those other social factors you were talking about earlier like urbanization and so on - and therefore that results in less volunteering.

Paul Reed: I think it could go both ways. But I think the decline that might take place in volunteering would probably be an indicator of something larger that it's part of than something it stands for.

Linda Graff: the factors that you've talk about - the civic syndrome, the expressive functionality of volunteering rather than just a provider of services, this notion of social embeddedness - if those two are on

decline, either leading the decline in volunteering or resulting from a decline in volunteering or some combination thereof, what's the impact? I ask you, so what about that? What does all of that mean for the character of communities? Or who we are as Canadians?

Paul Reed: let me use a couple of metaphors, perhaps, to express the way I see volunteering in relation to communities. So long as we think of volunteering as just volunteering, as merely a pleasant past time I don't think we're going to really appreciate what it is.

And the two metaphors that I'll use are vitamins and yeast. My argument is that volunteering isn't just a pleasant add on past time activity. It is essential to our social order. If you think of how our health as individuals is so tightly affected by taking important vitamins and nutrients. They represent such a very, very small portion of what we eat but without them we become very debilitated, sometimes very, very ill. Think of yeast, a very small portion of a recipe making bread, but without it the bread is nothing, it will look like a flat piece of soda cracker. In other words something that is very small in quantity is very large in impact. That's what I think volunteering is.

Linda Graff: I don't think that a truly pervasive case for volunteering has ever really been made. I don't think that there's a community or a community leader who really, really understands the full impact of volunteering throughout their communities. I worry that if we neglect to think strategically about how to sustain and strengthen volunteering; if we fail to perceive, understand volunteering as an integral aspect of our way of life what it's like, what it feels like to be Canadian; if we fail to take concerted action soon enough, we'll pay a price.

Paul Reed: I think that there's more than strategic thinking that's necessary although that for sure is necessary.

** Thank you to Volunteer Edmonton for production of the transcripts from the Graff-Reed Conversations.
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