



WHO CARES?

*It's Fixable: The Challenge, The Remedy*¹

Audio Track #5, *Canada Who Cares?*

Linda L. Graff and Paul B. Reed

Paul Reed: Linda, we've asked the question several times, Who Cares? We've been talking about why volunteering is so very important, more than important, it's imperative, it's essential in our society. It calls for action. Something has to be done. From your experience over three decades working with voluntary organizations and with volunteers, what are some of the things that we can do, perhaps must do?

Linda Graff: I guess, the place to start, the thing that I think is most important is for us to recognize that this is not a volunteering problem. It's a community problem, it's a social problem, it's a way of life issue.

But solutions to this, all that we've been talking about, they're not to be found just in the nonprofit sector or even in the human service system. The issues are broader in their implications and the solutions need to be found broadly as well. I think we need to initiate community discussions. But probably the most critical thing here is for people to really understand what volunteerism is. It carries so much baggage. I've never seen anything be so pervasively stereotyped in spite all of the evidence to the contrary. We still think of volunteers as little old ladies and that is just so not the case. I think that once we begin to understand what's going on here and see the scope of this issue, we realize that volunteering is just the tip of the iceberg. Organizations need to change volunteer work to match the labour force. You know, for something as important as volunteering we know almost nothing about it.

I think we have to be very careful about what we don't do. We have, for example in well motivated attempts to try to stimulate volunteering, we've created these mandatory programs – we call them mandatory volunteering, which of course it isn't. It's mandatory community service. But what we're doing is we're boring into the conception of volunteering as a giving voluntarily exercised right; we're making people do things that they don't want to do and we're calling it volunteering. It's like saying, the criminal justice programs, so you've got some parking fines you haven't paid. We're going to give you a choice: go to jail or volunteer. Pick your punishment.

¹ Graff, Linda L. And Paul B. Reed. 2007. *It's Fixable: The Challenge, The Remedy*. Audio Track #5 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: Linda, I've heard you use the phrase "strengthening the volunteer manufacturing system." I've heard you speak repeatedly about the importance of infrastructure in improving volunteering in Canada. Can you speak about this a bit?

Linda Graff: I think it comes back to where you started on this question about what could we do. You talked about changing the lens, changing how we think about things. Volunteers are a natural resource, they're a raw material if you will in the nonprofit sector. The system that integrates and coordinates volunteers is outmoded. It was built in the '40s, '50s and '60s and early '70s when the volunteer work force was very different from what it is now. We're still trying to offer long-term routine work to a work force that's looking for short-term meaningful positions. It just doesn't work. We're still expecting volunteers to organize themselves even when the project is complex and requires significant oversight and coordination. And we're still often hiring unskilled staff to manage large and complex volunteer programs. We've got so much legislation, so many regulations that now bear on volunteering and we're expecting people who don't know about this to manage volunteer programs. We'd never do that for a manager of paid people. We'd never take on someone to manage 300 paid staff, who didn't have some kind of background in personnel management. I don't know why we think we can do that with volunteers.

The other thing is that time is the currency of volunteers. When we ask volunteers to volunteer for us, what we're asking them for is to give us time and time is one of our most precious commodities. In fact, if given a choice most people would take more free time than an increase in pay. So when we ask a volunteer to volunteer for us we have to absolutely respect that gift for the precious gift that it is. We need to have the work place ready; we need to have the training in good shape; we need to make sure things are ready to go so that volunteers understand we need them and we value them

Paul Reed: would you agree also that changing how volunteering is perceived is absolutely essential to its being more appreciated? And in particular the way in which it is valued - not in its monetary form - how much of what proportion of GDP it accounts for - it's not that that's nearly as important as understanding what difference volunteering makes to individuals and to communities. What difference it makes to the people who engage in volunteering. What difference it makes to the individuals, the families who benefit from the services that volunteers provide and volunteer organizations provide, and how communities are different as a result of there being significant proportions of their citizens engaging in volunteering. We also have to have a far better understanding of what the long run differences are that volunteering makes as well as immediate differences.

Linda Graff: I think that we've made a serious strategic error in efforts to calculate the value of volunteering – which has become quite popular, by the way these days, all focus on trying to attach some wage equivalent to a volunteer hour. And then we add up the volunteer hours and multiply it by some fictitious amount of money per hour, and say that's what volunteering is worth. In fact that's not what volunteering is worth – all that is is what we didn't pay to get it done. It has absolutely nothing to do with the value of volunteering. If we actually looked at the value of volunteering we'd be giving it a whole lot more credence than we do in this culture.

Paul Reed: what we're talking about here really is making the case for volunteering – it just hasn't been done nearly well enough. And making the case has to be done by every volunteer organization not just by large national organizations who have a responsibility for coordinating and directing volunteering in this country.

Linda Graff: it's a lot more than that though, Paul, because when you say it that way it sounds like it's a sector problem that organizations have to fix this. I think the implications go far, far beyond the voluntary sector. I think that there are implications of having many fewer volunteers that spread out across our entire society. I think mayors of municipalities need to be concerned; I think that chambers of commerce need to be concerned; United Ways need to be concerned; community foundations need to be concerned; companies, the private sector, needs to be concerned. You know if we see a drop in volunteerism, and we see a shift in the way of life and we become a less caring community and we become a less serviced community, it's going to be impossible to attract employees in a more competitive hiring environment. The implications here are absolutely enormous. This is not just a volunteering problem and it's not a voluntary sector problem. It really is a social problem.

Paul Reed: I think what we're looking at here is really now is understanding some of the policy implications of where we are and where we may be heading with respect to volunteering. Do you think that anybody in this country really has an adequate understanding of the implications of having many fewer volunteers?

Linda Graff: not at all. It's hard for me to respond to that without being insulting to a whole bunch of folks but whenever we successfully get the attention of people about volunteering it turns into another recognition party. That's all people think about. Let's give them another award, let's create another long term service award. Let's give them another plaque, another pin. And people really don't have a sense about the importance of volunteering to what it's like to live in a community. In terms of what needs to be done, this is not a problem that you can throw a whole bunch of money at – this is, I think, a problem that demands understanding, demands awareness, demands appreciation. I think it's not something that we have to just look to politicians to fix. I don't think there's a political fix to this problem. I think there's an awareness fix. I think if we got an awareness of what volunteerism was about, the fix would happen automatically.

Now I do a lot of international work and it's really been in the last few years of working overseas that I've got a new perspective on what things are like here in Canada. Don't get me wrong. I love this country and every time I go away I'm even more happy to come home. But when I see what other governments, what other countries are doing, how much they appreciate and value volunteering, often in those countries where volunteering hasn't developed spontaneously, hasn't developed naturally.

Paul Reed: a couple of quick examples?

Linda Graff: I was on a panel in Hong Kong a year and a half ago or so sharing the stage with a representative from Mainland Chinese government and he was saying, he was happy to announce that Mainland China was making the developing of volunteering part of their five year plan. I mean, that's critical. Singapore, a little island country the size of, I don't know, Prince Edward Island or Vancouver Island or something like that, has a national volunteer centre with 30 core staff and it's only been in existence four years. Our national volunteer centre, Volunteer Canada, has a core staff of four, five, six people and been around for 30 years. What are we accomplishing? Shame on us as Canadians for not paying attention to this incredible resource that we've got going for us and woe is us if we don't recognize what's going to happen the next three, four, five, six, seven years out when it starts to decline.

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