

In the Community
Members Put Volunteerism Into Action
By DAVE SHADOVITZ, Philadelphia Bureau Chief

Buddhism teaches that no human being can exist in a state of total isolation; instead we congregate and live by supporting and helping one another.

— The New Human Revolution, vol. 1, p. 154

It was a chilly, overcast day as President Bill Clinton, former presidents Gerald Ford and George Bush and retired Gen. Colin Powell gathered in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia, where the Declaration of Independence was adopted. There in late April they signed “America’s Promise to Youth,” a document committing resources to helping 2 million young people.

The signing was part of the Presidents’ Summit for America’s Future, a three-day event that encouraged Americans to volunteer their time to assist at-risk youngsters. Mr. Clinton told those attending that the problems facing young people “can only be solved when there is a one-on-one connection, community by community, neighborhood by neighborhood, street by street, home by home, with every child in America.”

In many respects, this theme and others expressed at the summit echoed challenges set by General Director Zaitso for 1997, including for the SGI-USA to become an organization rooted in the community.

For those in the SGI, volunteerism is as much a part of their lives as doing gongyo and chanting daimoku. Every day, members diligently exert themselves to help others by visiting fellow members, chanting daimoku with them, sharing experiences and participating in other SGI-USA activities. Such volunteerism affects society on the most fundamental and profound levels.

But for certain members, the spirit of volunteerism doesn’t stop there. In some cases, they may volunteer double-digit hours each week assisting children in school. In other cases, they may work side-by-side with children in the community or lend a helping hand to seniors.

Yet while these volunteers may differ in what they do, they share at least one thing — a belief that they get as much out of their efforts as those on the receiving end.

A Win-Win Situation

“There’s a long tradition of seeing volunteering as a form of charity, based on altruism and selflessness,” explains Susan J. Ellis, president of the nonprofit organization Energize Inc., an international training and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism based in Philadelphia. “The best volunteering does involve the desire to serve others, but this does not exclude other motivations as well.... Instead of considering volunteering as something you do for people who are not as fortunate as yourself, begin to think of it as an exchange.”

Miki Yoshida, a member in Westminster, Calif., has apparently found that to be the case. “Volunteerism is about caring for other people,” she says. “By volunteering your time, you expand your horizon.”

Ms. Yoshida has spent time during the past year working with seniors at Leisure World, a senior citizen community based in Laguna Niguel, Calif. “They enjoy the time I spend with them,” she reports, “and I get a lot out of it, too.”

She notes that the volunteer work she does never fails to encourage her. “Much like doing a home visit, I always leave with a feeling of fulfillment,” says the young women’s division headquarters leader.

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Roughly 3,000 miles away in Clifton, N.J., Irma Gorham devotes more than 10 hours a week to volunteering, much of it in nearby Patterson. “If I don’t have a [Buddhist] activity,” she says, “I’m doing some form of volunteer work.”

For Women’s History Month, Ms. Gorham — noticing Patterson wasn’t doing anything related to the event — helped organize food assistance and job training for 125 homeless women. Other SGI-USA members participated in the effort as well.

In addition, Ms. Gorham recently spent time helping young people understand the importance of voting. Along with two other SGI members, she went door to door in the Patterson area to talk with young people between the ages of 18 and 23 about the importance of registering to vote and voting.

Ms. Gorham, who works for the New York City Housing Authority and has been doing volunteer work for more than 10 years now, hopes that the Presidents’ Summit encourages more people to volunteer their time. She feels that Americans are becoming more open to the idea.

“People started to think that they would have to be paid to volunteer their time in the late 1980s,” she recalls, “that they have specific skills so they should be paid for it. But now I get a sense that there’s more of an attitude that we’re all in this together.”

Ms. Gorham says she encourages other members who have extra time to participate as well. “I told them that this is your community, too,” she says. Some people, she notes, have been hesitant to join in because they feel that they may lack strong communication skills, but “I explain to them that volunteering isn’t necessarily high profile. You can fold and stuff envelopes. You can make calls.”

Striking the Right Balance

Not surprisingly, one of the biggest challenges for anyone interested in volunteering is striking the right balance between volunteer work and other activities.

Vicki Sheppard of Philadelphia, who has been volunteering her time in some capacity for the past eight years, admits that that’s sometimes easier said than done. “I think there are some things that are simply worthwhile doing, or I push myself past my own limitations,” says Ms. Sheppard, who besides being a women’s division district chief recently joined the board of directors for the Boys and Girls Club in the area. “I say to myself, ‘If I attend this meeting, I’ll be able to get some information that might help the kids.’ So even if I’m tired, I’ll push myself to do it — and I’m always glad I did.”

Ms. Sheppard notes that her Buddhist practice was the key to her efforts. “Because of the brick walls you keep running into, a lot of people simply give up,” she says. “It’s frustrating to see children not getting the care they need and to see progress come slowly. But my practice has taught me to look at things for the long haul. You have to keep making causes.”

At the same time, she adds, her practice has allowed her to become more compassionate as a person.

Because Ms. Sheppard lives in Philadelphia, where the Presidents’ Summit was held, she had the opportunity to participate in the event. She hopes that the summit will help get the word out about the importance of volunteerism, especially as it relates to young people.

“We have to talk about it more,” she says. “It’s good to see the president and movie stars talking about it. But there has to be more exposure in the media and television, because that’s what people respond to.”

Links to Daily Life

While it’s certainly not essential, these volunteers say, it helps to have your volunteer work tied in some way to other aspects of your life. In the case of Linda Delmar of Southern

California, who enjoys writing, much of her volunteer work involves children and arts.

Ms. Delmar has participated in a group called Volunteers in Public Schools since 1987 and has participated in a Creative Writing Workshop sponsored by the Public Corp. for the Arts since 1996. For the latter, she has applied her skills as a short story writer to read her works at area Latino events. Her stories talk about growing up in the barrio.

“I love meeting people,” Ms. Delmar says. “In fact, I thrive on it. I love the sharing of ideas, and many of the ideas [I hear in my volunteer work] I bring back to the SGI organization.”

She says she specifically chooses activities she can include her children in. “Sometimes I might have to arrange for baby-sitting, but usually my children go along with me to all my activities,” Ms. Delmar says. “I feel it is important for me to teach them about the importance of getting involved with the community, and I do so by taking them with me.”

She points out that the very first Boys and Girls Group activity she helped coordinate was a beach clean-up. Since then, several such clean-ups have taken place, with one more planned for this June.

“I feel that every person has to feel it in their own heart to get off the couch and do something,” she says. “But a person shouldn’t feel obligated; a person should feel joyful doing something for others.”

Likewise, Denise Mercherson of Chicago believes that having some overlap with what one does for a living can be helpful. Ms. Mercherson, a lawyer with the Chicago Board of Education, is involved with Imagine Chicago, which describes itself as “a bold experiment that invites youth, community leaders, and ordinary citizens to engage in a structured dialogue on their own dreams and the city’s future, and then become part of a positive movement toward progress.”

One of Imagine Chicago’s projects is to create more intergenerational sharing in the Chicago school system, a project the SGI-USA’s Culture Department has been involved in.

Personally, Ms. Mercherson has devoted time to tutoring young lawyers who are studying to take the bar exam. “I enjoy giving to others what’s been given to me,” says Mercherson, who reports she took the bar twice before passing. “I find great satisfaction in taking the time to help someone anticipate what might be on the exam.”

Ms. Mercherson adds that she’s been able to transfer a lot of what she’s learned about nourishing one-on-one relationships in her SGI activities to the volunteer work she now does. “I’ve been able to make a connection with these individuals so I can give them the confidence to help them advance,” she says.

She believes the subject of volunteerism should come up more in school, suggesting it needs to be incorporated in the social studies program. “It’s important for building character,” she says.

In general, suggests consultant David C. Forward, volunteers share certain attributes. After interviewing employee volunteers from around the country for his book *Heroes After Hours*, he said he found these four often crop up: they are incredibly busy people, even before their volunteerism involvement; they are results oriented; they have the ability to motivate others; and they take enormous personal satisfaction from the act of serving others.

But the author also added that one other theme emerged from his interviews as well: “That one person can make a difference.” For those members volunteering their time and energy to help others in their communities, it’s the difference that makes it worth the while.

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