

EDITORIAL: Get Involved

Some schools, plagued by crime, are turning to student crime-fighting groups to help keep the peace by patrolling campuses and reporting potential problems. The Florida Youth Crime Watch Association (YCWA), founded in 1974 after a 12-year-old girl was raped in her Miami neighborhood, now has chapters in at least 500 schools in 16 states. After a YCWA chapter was created during the 1993–94 school year at Miami’s largest high school, police tracked a 40.5 percent dip in crime at the school that year and 14 percent the following year.

Someone saw a need and worked to fill it.

Colin Powell and others were recently in the news celebrating the first anniversary of the Presidents’ Summit for America’s Future — the April 1997 gathering in Philadelphia intended to ignite a revival of volunteerism. They are reminding people of their goal to increase volunteerism and by pointing out, once again, how far we have to go and how much there is to do.

But even Colin Powell can’t change our attitude or our actions about volunteerism. Not alone.

We have to do that. Us. One by one. We have to be the ones to recognize a need and then work together to fill it.

Volunteerism — the action of getting involved and taking responsibility in the community — must be a grass-roots movement. Unless we are individually motivated, unless we recognize a need and commit ourselves to resolving it, it doesn’t much matter what celebrities and government officials urge us to do.

In fact, the great benefit of volunteering is not only in what it can do for the needy. It also lies in what it can do for the volunteer. In terms of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, working for the benefit of others is absolutely essential to our development and our awareness as human beings.

In his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey says that donating time and effort to benefit of others is the ultimate character-builder. Volunteerism, he says, is not a process of giving, it is a process of gaining. Gaining our humanness.

Similarly, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, first president of the Soka Gakkai, postulated three phases of growth: dependent, independent and contributive. We start out depending on others, like babies, and gradually move to a stage of independence. There are pitfalls in both these stages. As SGI President Ikeda said: “Those possessing a strong spirit of independence often have an equally strong tendency to look down on others. And those who have the capacity to respect other people may tend to rely on others to such an extent that they cannot discipline themselves. It must be said that both cases represent a lack of maturity.”

Buddhism underscores the value of the contributive stage. President Ikeda’s message at the opening of Soka University of America’s graduate school reads in part: “A person who lives a contributive life neither relies on external authority nor lapses into arrogance. In a contributive life, the prime motivation is to contribute to the lives of others and to the realization of their happiness.”

You might say that the spirit of volunteerism is at the heart of our practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism.

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