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Volunteering – Renewal, Inspiration, and Insight

Volunteering has been credited with improving the immune system, depression, self-esteem, and general well being. Sharing your talents, rather dental related or not, often provides different rewards than those received working. It can also enhance your performance at your day job.

Some of the most extraordinary events have occurred to me while volunteering. The hugs of children receiving a new toothbrush that previously had none or shared one brush with siblings is incredibly heart warming. A group of migrant children wrote a song for the “dental lady” that brought tears to my eyes. Many groups I have worked with have never had a dental health professional volunteer, and were delighted, as oral health needs are so great. Performing non-dental activities allowed me to expand my knowledge and meet very interesting new people.

We are in a profession devoted to caretaking of others and many of you are actively involved in volunteering. At different points in our lives, varied opportunities present themselves. For those with small children, working in your children’s school consumes hours of your free time. For those like me, recently retired from university teaching, opportunities are endless.

The last three years I have been working with the Retired Seniors and Volunteer Program (RSVP). This national program has affiliates throughout the USA and is available in most communities. It is an eclectic group of participants aged 55 or older. I work with volunteers who are in their 80’s and enjoy their camaraderie while being inspired by their activism.

I have enjoyed multiple opportunities with RSVP in Florida and Michigan; stuffing envelopes for the Ballet, United Way, and the RSVP newsletters (while eating bagels or pizza). I have served as an advisory member to the library continuing education program and served as a speaker. I had the opportunity to develop a dental screening program for children of the working poor at a faith based Compassion Center. This led to the opportunity to speak to the parents of this underserved population.

I met a woman at a local jazz fest, which resulted in an opportunity to work with the parents and children with Spina Bifida, and presented an oral health program at their annual meeting. They were most grateful for the new toothbrushes and information.

While in Michigan, I became involved in my hometown via RSVP. I was placed with the Restorative Justice & Dispute Resolution Program developing a PowerPoint Presentation to promote their program to community organizations and local schools. I worked with our new community Senior Center and presented a program on oral health and wellness. I served as a hostess for the annual Christmas Tour of Homes in the newly restored historic district. I learned so much about my hometown and became much more attached to the community. With the recent economy hitting Michigan so hard, it was a pleasure to contribute to the rebuilding of the community.

Through volunteering we can expand our knowledge, meet new people who share similar goals, and enhance our understanding of others. These activities often give us a sense of renewal making us better clinicians in our offices. I knew nothing about our Restorative Justice and Mediation Center. However, putting together a marketing slide presentation allowed me the opportunity to research this office's mission. I had used Power Points for several years for teaching; now I had to put together a slide program about a topic for which I knew nothing. I certainly expanded my knowledge!

Many of my seminar participants have approached me following a lecture to inquire about getting started. I offer the following advice:

1. Pick an area that you enjoy – oral health, children, seniors, gardening, speaking, animals, the environment, etc.
2. Check out the numerous sources online for seeking volunteering opportunities, your local newspaper, and area newsletters.
3. Create an opportunity where none has existed. Approach your local community resources – senior centers, hospitals, botanical gardens, zoos, schools, animal shelters, etc. Most would be happy to let you serve.
4. Determine how much time you would like to devote – one hour a week or month. The beauty of volunteering is that you can determine how much time you wish to invest.
5. Your knowledge of dentistry makes you the “expert” in most community programs. Share with the many folks who do not have access to care. They will reward you with smiles, hugs, and gratitude!

6. Take advantage of October as National Dental Hygiene month by using suggestions on the ADHA website or February as National Children's Dental Health Month using the ADA website to promote oral health.
7. Be bold. Choose to apply your many talents to a project that expands your knowledge in something you have always wanted to learn.
8. Be flexible! Go with the flow.....My clinic at the Compassion center consists of two folding chairs, a bathroom sink, and sheets held with PVC pipe for walls.
9. Your professional organizations like the ADIA always need extra help! Step to the plate and begin building leadership skills.

Best wishes for a Happy New Year hopefully enriched with giving time to others. I am a better person for having volunteered and I promise exciting opportunities await you. I applaud your efforts and encourage you to continue devoting time to helping those in need!

BIO: Linda Meeuwenberg, RDH, M.A., MA. is the founder of Professional Development Association, Inc. She is an internationally recognized speaker and has authored numerous professional articles and a short story. She served as a Dental Hygiene Professor with Ferris State University in Michigan for thirty years. She is a Fellow with the ADIA where she has served as a speaker and authored newsletter articles. She enjoys volunteering in this next chapter of her life. She can be reached at meeuwen@centurytel.net or visit her website at www.lindapda.com.



Linda volunteering at the Orlando Compassion Center where she has a make shift clinic to screen oral health needs and educate children of the working poor.