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Volunteering: A resolution for the ages

By Scott Talley | Published 12/27/2006 | Comerica HomeFront

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Volunteering: A resolution for the ages

lose your eyes and imagine a world where more than one out of every four people you meet are willing to give their time and talent to help others, without material compensation.

Now open your eyes to this surprising fact: we already live in that type of world. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, 65.4 million, or 28.8 percent of American adults, performed volunteer work last year, an increase of nearly six million volunteers since 2002.

"Volunteering is food for the soul. When you help someone it lifts you spiritually and creates a feeling of pride," said Clara Jenkins, a member of the Detroit Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

In November, Jenkins and other Detroit Deltas presented the 49th annual Ebony Fashion Fair at the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts. Proceeds from the fashion extravaganza benefited the United Negro College Fund and supported Delta service projects, including scholarship funding, teen mentoring programs and aid to the homeless.

For service organizations like the Deltas, volunteer projects provide members an opportunity to demonstrate leadership by example, while proving the power of collective work and responsibility. The same can be true for companies who wish to share their values and priorities with the communities they serve.

"Volunteerism definitely supports Comerica's overall vision of 'helping people be successful' in a big way," said Charlene Cole, who coordinates volunteer opportunities for the bank's Michigan employees through the company's "Comerica Cares" initiative.

"I enjoy working with the volunteers because I am able to see and measure the effects that volunteerism has on a volunteer and the agency they volunteer with. In terms of the organizations that are supported by our volunteers, the good deeds are often measured by dollars raised, clothes donated and lives affected. But the individuals performing the good deeds actually benefit just as much, if not more.

"What we often hear is that volunteering fulfills a person's personal spirit or need to give back, which is something I think we all share. And when departments and friends volunteer together it enhances teamwork and team-building skills, so the company benefits as well."

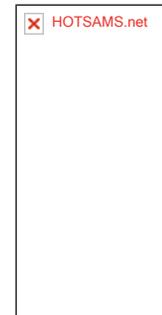
Cole says on an annual basis Comerica engages in more than 40 volunteer opportunities that involve more than 4,500

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employees. Through these efforts last year, Michigan's oldest bank raised more than \$450,000 for deserving organizations and causes.

And the impact of volunteering literally knows no borders, as Roland Odeleye can attest.

Despite the demands of his job and huge logistical challenges, Odeleye launched a non-profit organization that is providing vital assistance to people more than 5,000 miles away. Named in honor of Odeleye's late father, the Abel Ogundokun Odeleye Foundation addresses the welfare and educational needs of a six-town community located in the western region of Nigeria.

This year the foundation conducted a four-day health fair serving more than 1,100 people; awarded 35 scholarships; and commissioned the construction of a public borehole which will ensure safe drinking water.

"Honoring dad's last wish and preserving his legacy was at the core of the decision to establish the foundation," said Odeleye, a vice president in Comerica's Business Technology Services Department. "And although I have spent a bit of time volunteering locally here in the greater Detroit metropolitan area, I felt compelled to reach out further because of the challenges that I am aware of in developing countries.

"As much hard work as is involved with running the foundation, there is nothing more fulfilling than the knowledge that you're making a difference and constructively shaping the lives of individuals that have no chance of returning the favor...The gratitude and appreciation of the events' participants and beneficiaries is genuine and a powerful motivator. And I wouldn't trade the hard work it takes for anything else."

While often casually summed up as 'a nice thing to do,' it is becoming more apparent that volunteering is not only nice, but necessary if we are to effectively address society's enduring challenges on the national and global levels.

In an age of increased social needs and decreased personal time, the Points of Light Foundation estimates that today's volunteer workforce in America represents the equivalent of more than nine million full-time employees whose combined efforts are worth more than \$220 billion.

Detroit's Deborah Hardison Hill says only one question needs to be asked and then the importance of volunteering should become crystal clear for everyone.

"What if you or someone you loved were in that position and needed certain assistance to get by," asks Hardison Hill, who was honored as Comerica's National Volunteer of the Year in 2006.

A fixture at Comerica volunteer events, Hardison Hill has assisted numerous worthy causes and organizations including Paint the Town, Habitat for Humanity, United Negro College Fund, American Cancer Society, American Lung Association and Detroit Public Television.

She has also served her community by ministering to homebound senior citizens and counseling women undergoing drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

"No matter how down on your luck you are, there are always people out there who will help you, and no matter what your current situation is, there is always something you can do to help someone else," said Hardison Hill, who has been a catalyst for Comerica's volunteer efforts since joining the bank in 1989.



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