

Community Dispatch

An InfoFax of the Halton Social Planning Council & Volunteer Centre

December, 2001

Vol. 6, No. 2

BUILDING COMMUNITY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

On behalf of the Halton Social Planning Council and Volunteer Centre, I would like to extend out Seasons Greetings to all and our best wishes for a New Year that brings peace and justice to all.

This Community Dispatch continues our tradition of sharing the highlights of the keynote address presented at the Council's Annual General meeting. Guest speaker, André Picard, Quebec Bureau Chief of the Globe and Mail and author of *A Call to Alms: the New Face of Charities in Canada* reflected on "Building Community: The Contribution of the Voluntary Sector." It is with his thoughts that the Council brings to a close 2001, International Year of the Volunteer.

Joey Edwardh

Gordon Walker lived with his parents for 43 years. He never went anywhere without them. He didn't work. That's because Gordon is what people once called "mentally retarded." He lived on the margins of society. "His life wasn't much of a life at all," said his father. But his life was better than that of many of his contemporaries, who were locked away in institutions. Gordon's parents cared for him at home out of love. But when Gordon's mother died, his father realized that he would not live forever either. He did not want his boy to be condemned to life in an institution.

So Gordon's father helped found a group called PLAN – the Planned Lifetime Advocacy Network. PLAN creates circles of caring, a type of surrogate family, that allow people with developmental and psychiatric

disabilities to live in the community. So what does Gordon Walker's story have to do with tonight's talk?

My topic is "Building Community: The Contribution of the Voluntary Sector." I started with Gordon's story because it's a microcosm of what the voluntary sector can and should do. Good charitable groups, like PLAN, allow people to reach their potential, to participate in society as full citizens. They build community.

Having a strong voluntary sector is the difference between having a crude safety net (one that offers money and government programs) and a carefully woven safety net (one that supplements government programs with services that are adapted to the many needs that exist). Having a strong voluntary sector is the difference between having mere aggregations of people and having Communities (with a capital C).

To me, charities that do their job well – be it in the social sector, the arts, education or whatever – contribute to making their communities a better place. But what does that term mean? What is community? Community is something important and intangible. It's difficult to define, though many people have tried. The best definition of the word "community" that I have found is from John McKnight. He's a professor at Northwestern University and the author of a seminal work entitled "The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits," Professor McKnight says: "To some people, community

is a feeling, to some people it's relationships, to some people it's a place, to some people it's an institution." But the definition Professor McKnight always prefers is: "Community is a place where people prevail." That is a simple yet profound definition.

Where DO people prevail? In corporate boardrooms? On the stock market? In their workplaces? In legislatures and Parliament? It is worth noting that these are precisely the places that media focus all their attention. They are: Institutions where so-called ordinary people are virtually absent. People prevail in community centres, in churches, synagogues and mosques, in union halls, at soup kitchens, in parks, on the streets (at least in safe communities) and in volunteer centres. These are all places the media tends to ignore.

To me, one of the most alarming trends in modern society is the number of people who don't matter. Far too many of our fellow human beings have become negligible and disposable. When you open a newspaper these days, it's loaded with talk of globalization and mega-mergers, of wild stock market rides, of politicians who are contemptuous of their constituents. Even our governments have adopted corporate speak and corporate mentalities. We're not citizens anymore, we're clients.

Community, I think, is the antithesis. People who care about others, not just profits – people like yourselves – are seeking refuge. They are seeking a place to connect with their fellow human beings. The place to do that is the voluntary sector, or civil society, as some academics call it. Civil society is a space – economic, social and political – that is not occupied by business or government. It's a place where people matter. And it's an important and growing space.

The economist, John Kenneth Galbraith, once said: "If you don't count it, it doesn't count." In that spirit, I would like to give you some statistical information about the voluntary sector that contributes to understanding the context of your work.

There are almost 80,000 registered charities in Canada – and 10 new groups are being formed each week. The registered charities alone have revenues of \$90.5-billion annually. That's the equivalent of the Gross Domestic Product of British Columbia. And one in every 11 jobs in this country is in the voluntary sector. At last count, 21 million Canadian – 88 per cent of adults – gave money or goods to charity in the last year. About 7.5 million Canadians do formal volunteer work. Volunteers perform the equivalent of 578,000 full-time jobs – that is the equivalent of the entire workforce of Manitoba. If you put a dollar value on the work, it would be worth more than \$16-billion.

Charities also collect about \$10.5-billion in monetary donations each year. Only a tiny fraction comes from corporations. And an even smaller fraction comes from those spectacularly large gifts you read about in the paper occasionally. My favourite was the \$40-million that Joyce Young gave to the Hamilton Community Foundation. Mrs. Young was a long-time, dedicated volunteer. She invested some money in her nephew's company called Red Hat, which became one of the biggest Internet success stories and made her extremely wealthy. Mrs. Young said she found having all that money "frightening," so she gave it away. Mrs. Young's tale aside, most of the money charities raise is collected the hard way – those \$10, \$25, \$50 and \$100 cheques.

Canadians give, on average, a modest \$239 a year to charity. In fact, a funny little fact is that the best charitable donors are invariably dead. That's true. If you chart life-long giving,

it looks like this: A flat line with a spike up after death. But all those contributions, by the living and the dead, add up.

I think Canadians express their generosity collectively as much as they do individually. In my career, I have covered many disasters, from the Westray mine disaster to the Swissair crash. What I retain from tragedies like these is the willingness of Canadians to reach out to those in need, to risk their lives even to help. But we do that, in a less dramatic fashion, in our everyday lives as well. We pay higher taxes – in large part without complaint – because it is an efficient and fair way to fund the services we want, particularly universal healthcare.

An example of this today is my story in the Globe and Mail about a poll that found when Canadians were asked to choose between more nurses in the health care system and tax cuts, they chose the nurses by a margin of three to one. I think that's true of most social services.

Canadians are often portrayed as cheapskates because we presumably give less money to charity than our U.S. neighbours. That is true, but only on average, thanks to the super-rich like Bill Gates and George Soros. But the median of giving is about the same in each country, approximately \$150 annually. And our so-called needy still have a social safety net; they don't depend exclusively on handouts. You will not convince me that Americans are more generous or more philanthropic as long as tens of millions of citizens are denied healthcare services, and that tens of millions more have inadequate insurance plans. Nor will you convince me that having the elderly, the mentally ill and the down-and-out depend exclusively on charity and not state assistance, is humane and efficient. We have to be careful not to measure compassion or caring in strictly

monetary terms. The real impact of the voluntary sector cannot be measured in dollars.

Charities are the only institutions in our society that have as their specific mission to do good. Think about that for a moment! Paradoxically, that is precisely why the sector is virtually invisible in the media. We journalists focus on the negative. We take good for granted. But we do so at our peril and, in doing so, we serve the public poorly.

The real value of the voluntary sector, as economist Judith Maxwell stated so succinctly, is that it is the glue that holds everything together in society. The sector contributes mightily to social stability, to shaping our values, and our cultural outlook. The voluntary sector, in essence, is what makes Canadians Canadian. And, as an added bonus, doing good – or building social capital, as the academics say – is good for the economy, for the so-called bottom line. It's easy to be contemptuous of charities, to believe that an invisible hand guides the economy, that all people need to do is pull up their socks, etc. But the reality is that the best way to keep profits rolling in year after year, to keep employees secure and happy, is to operate a company in a healthy community – one that has cultural institutions, sports groups, social agencies, voluntary associations and, above all, a sense of community. I believe there is an important distinction to be made between making money and creating wealth. And the way you create a sound basis for profitability – by investing in the community – is the basis for lasting wealth.

Unfortunately, we're not very good yet at quantifying or attaching a dollar value to social capital. But that will come. All kinds of measurement tools are being developed that will allow us, in the near future, to put a

dollar value on different aspects of volunteering and community-building. In the meantime, we have to trust the anecdote, trust what we know in our hearts, that the sector really makes a difference. And, by the way, one of the biggest myths is that charities serve only the poor. That is nonsense. The biggest beneficiaries of the sector are the middle-class – who depend on artistic, sporting, cultural and social institutions to keep their communities safe, and to keep them healthy – and the wealthy, who depend on the sector to keep their markets stable.

But we do have a problem! We don't really have the language to talk about the contribution of the voluntary sector to our communities. In Canada, as in much of the Western world, we are inarticulate about the values we cherish. We do not, in this country, have a language for discussing public good. That is ironic given the fact that Canada is one of the countries in the world where collective programs like medicare are quite developed. They make us the envy of the world. But in this age of individualism, these collective programs are under attack. We need to find the words, and the courage to defend them.

We need to talk about responsibilities, not just entitlements. We need to talk about the

collective benefits of citizenship, not just individual rights. There is a disturbing level of anti-government and anti-social rhetoric that dominates public discourse today. Charities can deliver services efficiently, they can provide important policy direction, and they can even supplement services provided by the state. But they cannot replace them. Nor should they be expected to. We need to find an antidote to this anti-social rhetoric that is so prominent today. We need to develop a language for discussing public good, and economic models that measure and value more than crude profits.

*One of the people who truly understood the benefits of the voluntary sector and the power of community was the legendary civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. In one of his speeches, he spoke about the transformative power of community. "Every person," he said, "must decide whether to walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?" The answer most of you would like to hear, for the sake of your children and their children is: **Building Community.***

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