



Personal Reflections
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Volunteers – A Lifeline to Hope Ensuring a Much-Needed Human Connection

I have always been a very avid reader of anything of an historical nature. After all, it seems that the best, and sometimes most unbelievable stories find their basis in truth. And of such great importance especially now, I firmly believe that there is truth in Maya Angelou's statement that, "You can't really know where you are going until you know where you have been."

It probably isn't so surprising then to learn that I recently read through an issue of Canada's History magazine which captured my eye with a photo of Amelia Earhart on the cover. I have tremendous admiration for the many accomplishments of Ms. Earhart – her story is quite amazing! But my immediate thought upon seeing her picture on the cover of a Canadian history publication was, "what on earth was Amelia Earhart's connection to Canada?" The answer was remarkable and is a beautiful story which ties into this month's National Volunteer Week in Canada!

The story goes that in the latter part of WWI, Amelia visited her sister (who was enrolled at St. Margaret's College in Toronto) during Christmas, 1917. While walking along King Street one day with her sister they came upon four soldiers, each missing a leg and supporting each other. This so shook Amelia that she had to duck into a local store – perhaps not a surprise given that the U.S. had only that year entered the war, and the ravages of battle were not so much a common sight there.

Instead of returning to the U.S., Amelia decided to stay in Toronto so she could help in the war effort. She completed courses in first aid and home nursing at the St. John's Ambulance Brigade



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becoming the sole American to enroll in wartime for the Volunteer Aid Detachment. Dubbed “Sister Amelia” by those she tended to, Earhart spent several years here volunteering her time in everything from working 12-hour days emptying bedpans, making beds, washing patients and serving food to preparing laboratory slides and cultures.

This is a singular example of volunteerism at the time, but not by any means remote. Volunteering is a way of life for many Canadians – it is now and has been since confederation. Some volunteers and volunteer organizations have been inspired – like Earhart – by compassion, some by injustice, others by the simple want to help and support their neighbours and communities.

This Canadian tradition of helping fellow citizens in many ways started on the concept of ‘loving our neighbours,’ building on the values of our Native communities, Canada’s first Christian settlers and the members of virtually every religion which have arrived in Canada since.

And it’s fascinating to know that the roots of many of our volunteer efforts now have a direct relationship to the traditions of our multicultural heritage, from practises adopted in the Maritimes from the English Poor Laws of the 18th century, to Canadians of German descent forming the first funeral or burial society in Halifax in 1753, the founding and work of the Chinese Consolidated Benefit Association in the late 1800’s, to the founding of the CNIB as a direct effect of the 1917 Halifax explosion.

Fast-forward to present day, volunteerism in Canada connects people, communities, non-profit and public organizations and, quite frankly all that we do now like at no other time. In 2018 almost 13 million people volunteered for charities, non-profits and community organizations in Canada, accounting for approximately 41% of Canadians aged 15 and over. They dedicated about 1.7 billion hours to their formal volunteer activities (people giving unpaid help through groups, clubs, and organizations) – a volume of work equivalent to more than 863,000 full-time year-round jobs.

Perhaps not surprisingly Baby Boomers and Matures (ages ranging from 56 – 103) were over 70% more likely to iGens (born 1996 and up) to be ‘top’ volunteers, spending 132 hours more on volunteer activities.

But hold on and perhaps a silver lining of the current pandemic - with many baby boomers and matures now struggling to keep their businesses afloat or working from home, concerned about their own health and isolating, and in some cases caring for elderly parents, this group has had less time for volunteering during the pandemic. During this time there has been a remarkable surge of iGens, Millennials, and Gen Xers who have been committing to informal volunteering – volunteers providing unpaid help as an individual to others (non-relative) through activities such as shovelling snow, shopping for the elderly and many other examples.

In our own backyard – in the Region of Halton it is estimated that approximately 200,000 volunteers (age 15 and over) put in over 325,000 hours per year. If we apply an average wage of \$27 (76% of the economy wide average wage of \$35.50/hr), this equates to approximately \$870,000,000 + or 17,000 full-time jobs - or 11% of all full-time jobs in Halton.



Last week was National Volunteer Week in Canada. And of course, as part of Community Development Halton, Volunteer Halton has been very actively involved. We would have liked to have hosted our annual (in-person) Volunteer Recognition Breakfast – which obviously we couldn't. That wasn't going to stop us, however from focussing on the most important aspect of that event – the amazing volunteers in this Region who give of their time, helping our neighbours and make living in Halton so fulfilling.

Through interaction with many of our community groups in the four major centres in Halton we were able to identify 8 individuals who CDH and Volunteer Halton were proud, and quite frankly privileged to present our 2021 Volunteer Impact Awards. In all honesty, every single volunteer whose names were put forward – and those who were not – deserved awards as well! Every ounce of commitment put into individual acts of volunteerism within our communities was so well appreciated by the community groups through whom the volunteers participated and especially by those for whom they served.

I personally had the immense joy of being on hand for each of these presentations. It is so easy to get down during this pandemic, but I must say that each of the days in which my colleague, Heather Thompson and I had the pleasure of meeting these volunteers and the organizations who nominated them, was pure joy for me. To see the passion which drives these individuals, the commitment they have provided – many of them for years and for several organizations - and to experience 'vicariously' through the volunteers the fulfillment which they receive by giving of themselves, well, it was so gratifying for me and filled me with immense pride. Not only to meet these incredible individuals and families but to feel even just a little part of the amazing compassion that they provide to their 'neighbours.'

I can't say strongly enough how important these volunteer efforts are to the communities in which we are all most fortunate to live. Our volunteers make lives and living better for us all and I can only suggest that more of us get involved with the wonderful missions which each of Halton's community groups operate throughout the year – you will be overwhelmed at how good it feels.

I invite you to please take a look at the beautiful stories of those to whom Volunteer Halton had the privilege to present awards. You can read these stories on CDH's website or through this link <https://cdhalton.ca/2021/04/23/halton-volunteer-impact-award-2021>.

How important is it to one who gives so much of themselves through their volunteer work? I can answer quite simply by quoting one of the lovely individuals with whom I had the pleasure of meeting last week "volunteering is as necessary to me as breathing."

Warmest Regards,

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