

The importance, benefits of volunteering

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When I was a kid, my grandmother was my hero. In my little hometown of Oakdale, if someone's house flooded or burned, even if it was in the middle of the night, she would get a call from the fire or police chief and off she would head to the disaster.

It didn't matter who they were or how it happened, Grandma took care of them. She did it because they needed help and she and her little team of volunteers knew how to deliver that help.

Unlike how it is today here in Napa County, our one-stoplight town snuggled at the base of the Sierra foothills in the 1950s and 60s, didn't have the Red Cross for home disasters, but Grandma and her volunteers followed the Red Cross mission and made sure anyone who was struck by disaster was provided with assistance or referral for help.

Today, I work for the Napa County Red Cross and as I think about the things my grandmother did — how her life impacted so many people — I am struck by how her giving came back to her in so many positive ways.

Volunteering was at the very center of my grandmother's heart. She always seemed happy, was always singing, whistling and busy on her old treadle sewing machine making a new quilt for someone who would need it.

This last spring, the Carnegie Mellon University came out with a study which showed that older adults who volunteer at least 200 hours per year, or about four hours a week, decrease their risk of hypertension, or high blood pressure, by 40 percent.

Numerous other studies dating back to the mid-1950s have repeatedly shown that people who volunteer regularly — even as little as 40 hours per year — are happier, more satisfied with their life, and are generally in better health both mentally and physically.

This was definitely true in my grandmother's life. While no one ever kept track of the hours she volunteered for her community or the number of quilts she made over her lifetime, my grandmother lived to be 96 years of age and left a huge positive impact on a vast number of people whose lives her path she had crossed.

No one told my grandmother this was something she needed to do. She did it because there was a need and she knew how to fill it. My grandmother lived John F. Kennedy's words, "One person can make a difference, and everyone should try."

In 2007, the Corporation for National Community Service published "The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research," which is available online at their website. Study after study shows the incredible lifetime benefits of giving of one's own time for the betterment of others.

The Health Benefits of Volunteering cites a Duke study that showed how heart-attack survivors

who volunteered after their recovery reported a reduction in despair and depression. The review also cites a number of other studies which show volunteering may enhance a person's social networks, buffer stress and reduces the risk of disease.

The Corporation for National Community Service also did their own study that showed states with the greatest number of volunteers also have lower rates of mortality and incidents of heart disease.

Volunteering isn't just for older adults. I remember asking my mom how long Grandma had been volunteering; she just shook her head and said, "She's been doing it as long as I've been in the family." And, from everything I could ever learn, it had simply been my grandmother's way of life.

Working at the Napa County Red Cross provides me with the opportunity to work with some of the amazing volunteers who serve our communities here in Napa County. I asked some of our 119 volunteers to answer in one sentence, "Why do you volunteer?" Here are their responses:

— Kate Benscoter, Chairperson of Napa County Red Cross Board: "I find volunteering for the Red Cross gratifying, enlightening, and fun. It is a great organization that does great work."

— Frances Houser, board chair emeritus and volunteer for six years: "I volunteer to give back to my community and to connect directly and individually with others when disaster strikes.

— Larry La Pierre, volunteer since Hurricane Katrina in 2005: "To make a difference in someone's life in times of stress and pain."

Research that has been done over the years that indicates the most beneficial thing that someone who is considering volunteering can do is to volunteer.

The positive impact that volunteering has is not something reserved only for the older generations. By volunteering while young, the health benefits of lower stress, developing a strong sense of purpose, and experiencing satisfaction in life can end up increasing the volunteer's active life expectancy making it possible to lead an even longer more meaningful community focused life.

The opportunities to volunteer in Napa County and its communities are many and varied. Here at the Napa County Red Cross, we welcome your interest in volunteering. We have a number of volunteer opportunities including preparedness training, general office support, and disaster response with a strong need for licensed medical and mental health professionals.

We also provide free volunteer training, so when a disaster strikes — no matter if it is a single house fire or a major disaster — you can step up and make a difference in your community.

I would like invite you to get started by going online to our website redcross.org/ca/napa, go down to the bottom of the page where it says "Join In" and click "Volunteer," or give me a call at 707-257-2900.

Do something for yourself and your community — volunteer!

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