

THE ART OF

Volunteering

BY M. LOUISE WALTERS AND WILLIAM R. GRIFFIN

A sign near a house of worship reads: "You have never really lived until you have done something for someone who can never repay you."

Americans are generous volunteers; choosing service over self-interest is a foundational cultural norm. Some people do it out of a sense of duty, some volunteer as "a way to give back," while others simply find the work to be fun and rewarding. In 2017, more than 25 percent of U.S. residents volunteered, contributing 8.8 billion hours of time – at an estimated value of \$195 billion. Meanwhile, donations to nonprofits for the period totaled \$420 billion, the equivalent of approximately 10 percent of the federal budget.

Volunteers from Skidaway Island and the Landings contribute an annual average of 64 hours (a workweek and a half) to more than 100 groups. In the Chatham County area, more than 1,000 entities meet the legal definition of 'nonprofit organization.'

Nationwide, there are 1.5 million nonprofit organizations. One million are 501(c)(3) public charities, private foundations, scientific, educational and religious groups. Many – but not all – are exempt from most federal income taxes and some state sales and property taxes. The most compelling economic incentive available to those who donate to 501(c)(3) organizations is the federal income tax deduction. The remaining half-million nonprofits are a mixture of veterans' organizations, teachers' retirement fund associations, social/recreational

clubs, agricultural/horticultural groups, and labor organizations. These groups all have distinct 501(c) classifications specific to their missions. However, contributors to groups other than 501(c)(3)s don't receive the benefit of federal income tax deductions because these groups are membership-based, and membership dues are not tax-exempt.

GETTING STARTED AS A VOLUNTEER

Many people are shy or hesitant to volunteer. Speak with friends who volunteer, especially those involved with groups whose mission aligns with your interests. If the organization helps out at a local elementary school in the afternoon, and if you enjoy working with young children, maybe that's a good match. Then, research local nonprofit organizations through their websites or other resources. Get a sense of the scope and scale of their impact and the state of their financials and organizational structure and stability.

Does a group's schedule coincide with yours. A volunteer who regularly has scheduling conflicts isn't very beneficial to the group, nor does the individual achieve a sense of fulfillment.

Generally, there are three ways to volunteer. Some people volunteer in all three ways.

WORKERS

These are the folks that show up to coach soccer practice, help maintain facilities, or pack food boxes. Perhaps a friend enjoys work-



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ing at special events for a local nonprofit organization and urges you to join the fun. Before accepting, you should conduct some due diligence.

- **How does the group organize its volunteers?** Is there a staff member who manages volunteers? If so, meet with the staffer and learn how the process works. How are projects chosen? How often will you be recruited to work? Weekly or monthly for small events? A couple times a year for really big events?

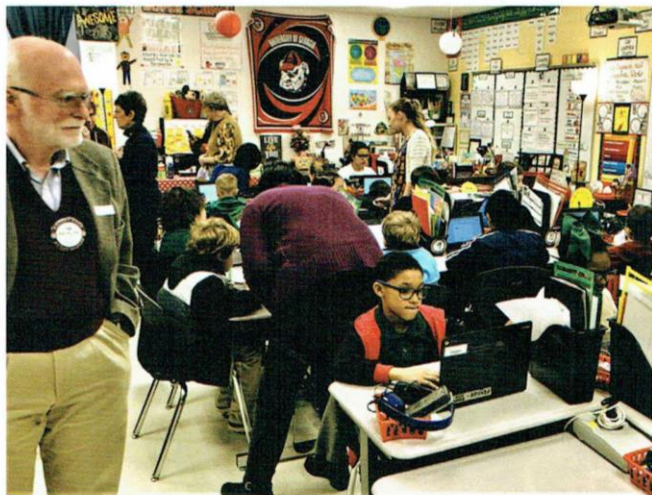
- **What kind of events?** If they regularly hold events like mixers or fundraising parties with wine-and-cheese and you're on a strict diet, maybe that's not a good fit. Instead, you could help with set up before the event and be available for clean up afterward.

LEADERS

Some people volunteer as committee chairs or board members of nonprofit organizations. Management expert Peter Drucker tells of a for-profit company president who serves on of her own board of directors as well as that of a nonprofit. According to the woman, the biggest difference between the two roles is that "...for-profit boards begin with their financial reports while nonprofit boards begin with their missions."

Suppose a friend asks you to join the board of a local nonprofit organization. There are several things to think about before you accept.

- **How are board meetings conducted?** Is there a written agenda that includes a beginning time, establishment of a quorum, and an es-



Tom Stanley (left) and Rotary Club members lend a hand during a classroom computer lab at Hesse K-8 School.

established adjournment? Examine the bylaws, meeting minutes and the financial reports. Does the board conduct its business using Robert's Rules of Order as its parliamentary authority?

- **Who is on the board?** Talk to some of the directors to get their thoughts about the condition of the organization. What do they think the board (and the organization) needs? Are you capable of responding to those needs? If the organization needs a treasurer and you're an accountant, that could be a match. But if you're a chemist, perhaps not.

- **Are you expected to do more than occupy a seat at the table?** Some nonprofits expect board members to donate money or help at events. If you're prepared to give more than just meeting time, it helps the organization as a whole. But if not, it's something to be agreed upon beforehand.

DONORS

These are people who focus on financial support, which might be in addition to or in place of volunteer work. As a donor, you want to understand the impact your funds will have, or the societal return on your investment. It's important to consider an organization's financial viability.

- **What is the state of an organization's finances?** Review financial reports. Understand an organization's overall financial health and its trajectory. What are you willing/able to do to impact financial results? If there are some financial problems and you're a "roll-up-the-sleeves" person, maybe that's a good opportunity for you. But if you don't enjoy fundraising or aren't comfortable asking for money, you might want to steer clear of an organization that expects you to solicit your network on its behalf.

People who volunteer give their best to their community – they give their minds and their hearts. With heightened awareness of nonprofit organizations and a growing interest in making a difference, volunteers can improve their leadership skills while benefitting organizations with fresh ideas and new approaches. In doing good for others and the community, acts of kindness can change lives forever.



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A career organization executive and subject matter expert in the management of nonprofit organizations, Louise has led trade associations, professional societies, economic development groups, and chambers of commerce having 40 to 5,000+ members. She is a change agent, troubleshooter, organization builder, trainer, and coach/mentor of community leaders, volunteers, organization executives, and staffs of corporate, non-profit, governmental, and educational organizations. She has been a volunteer for many years. Louise is also an academic scholar. Her Doctoral research addresses relationships between nonprofit organization CEOs and board chairs and the impacts on their nonprofit groups. Louise's emphasis areas are strategy, strategic planning, policy, governance, and operations.

Walters (President) and Griffin (Vice President), are the core team leading The Leadership Center, LLC. TLC's mission is to inspire leadership and organization excellence by advancing the effectiveness of volunteer leaders and professionals through education, training, and personal and professional development. The company provides organization consulting, management, strategic planning, trouble-shooting, and problem-solving to nonprofit groups, their leaders, and stakeholders. Both of TLC principals are also involved in the academic sector where they create, revise, and deliver collegiate courses. The firm is a certified woman-owned small business enterprise headquartered in Savannah, GA.

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