



There's something about the word volunteer

CHRISTIE ZIMMER

Guelph is the volunteer capital of Canada according to Statistics Canada's 2004 Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participation. Almost 70 per cent of Guelph's residents volunteer -- the highest percentage in the country -- and because of this, Maclean's magazine has named our city Canada's most caring community.

We're not surprised, right? We've known it all along.

In fact, for the past few months, I've been gearing up to write a column on exactly that subject. There is only one small thing that has, on occasion, given me pause. It's the response I get when I tell people that I'll be writing about local volunteerism.

"Hmm," they generally say.

Even my mother, who is supposed to love everything I do and who is a longtime volunteer herself, said, "That's nice dear," and I swear, over the telephone line, I heard her turn up the volume on HGTV.

Is there something about the word "volunteer" that turns people off?

This is the question I put to Cathy Taylor, executive director of the Volunteer Centre of Guelph/Wellington. Considering the name of the organization she leads, it may not have been the most tactful question I've ever asked, but she graciously took a crack at it anyway.

"Definitely," she said. "There's something about that word."

In rural communities, for example, Taylor told me that people prefer to "participate" in their communities, rather than volunteer, even though their activities, such as coaching in the local soccer league or baking for a school fundraiser, would be viewed by many as volunteer activities.

Among new Canadians, she noted, the word "volunteer" is simply not translatable in many languages because community participation is often not a formalized process, as it is in Canada.

And here's a fitting quote from the website for Volunteer Genie, an initiative based in the United Kingdom that links the media with volunteer recruitment: "We all know about the stereotype volunteer: middle-aged, maybe retired, do-gooder, wears socks and sandals, most likely a woman, probably white."

The description falls well below the bar for political correctness, but that image is out there and it adds a sad weight to the baggage already carried by the word volunteer.

Surely, I asked, there must be a better way to describe the two billion hours contributed by Canadians in 2004, the period assessed in that Statistics Canada survey on volunteering.

After a long pause, Taylor said, "There is no easy word."

Two suggested alternatives are participation and helping out, but neither really captures the profound impact of each of those billions of hours in strengthening our communities and in connecting us to each other in spite of our perceived differences.

What about "Giving"? That's the title of former U.S. President Bill Clinton's 2007 book, which takes a global look at civic activism, including volunteering. This, I believe, is a word that hits very close to the mark.

Consider this: "volunteering" is defined by Volunteer Canada as: "the most fundamental act of citizenship and philanthropy in our society. It is the offering of time, energy and skills of one's own free will."

To me, these are acts of giving. Each and every one of these gifts of time, energy and skills by the hundreds of non-profit organizations in Guelph, like Ed Video, whose volunteers teach other volunteers to make movies, and the thousands of individual volunteers, like Peter and Natalie Giesbrecht who use their skills as graphic artists to volunteer via the Internet, make me proud to call Guelph home.

This issue -- the meaning and effectiveness of the word volunteer -- is something we'll have to work on, you and I. In the meantime, let's get out there, take a new direction and meet the people and organizations who are building this community, one hour at a time.

The first two articles in this new series will feature the work of Ed Video and the Giesbrechts. I hope you'll come along for the ride.

Christie Zimmer lives and writes in Guelph. She can be reached at christiezimmer@rogers.com.

ON THE WEB

Volunteer Centre of Guelph-Wellington:

volunteerguelphwellington.on.ca



© Copyright 2007 Metroland Media Group Ltd. All rights reserved.
The reproduction, modification, distribution, transmission or
publication of any material from www.thespec.com is strictly
prohibited without the prior written permission of Metroland Media
Group Ltd.

