

Voluntary Heroes

How we live best when we give most.

By Patricia Quigley '78

Patricia Quigley '78 is assistant director of University Relations at Rowan.

Side by side with 17 other volunteers this summer, amidst breathtaking beauty and unspeakable poverty, Elizabeth Randazzese '00 sawed boards, nailed plywood, swept floors and painted walls in the tiny village of Lomai, Fiji. Her job was to help construct houses for the villagers during two weeks for the Global Village program of Habitat for Humanity.

It was the experience of a lifetime. "The Fiji people were very sweet, very open—definitely the nicest people I ever met in my life," said Randazzese, president of the Rowan University Student Government Association.

The setting was a world away from her life at Rowan and her hometown of Flemington. There were no televisions or computers in Lomai; indeed there was no electricity. When it got dark around 6 p.m., they used kerosene lamps for light. Running water from a nearby river supplied community showers. Volunteers and villagers used outhouses.

Randazzese's experience in Fiji was her first involvement with Habitat for Humanity but not her first time donating her time to help others. Volunteering is and has been important to her.

She is not alone. A 1998 study commissioned by Lions Club International found that more than one half of adult Americans say they volunteer time to charitable causes, on average donating eight and a half hours each month. About 80 percent said they spend as much or more time on volunteer activities than they did five years ago. Even though time feels scarce in today's fast-paced society, more than 90 percent said they strongly or somewhat agree that donating time is as valuable as donating money.

Joyce Miller '84, a retired community college professor from Woodbury, knows



Even at work on the construction site, Elizabeth Randazzese '00 honored the custom of the Fiji women by wearing a modest top and skirt.

how valuable volunteering is. She has volunteered for the Gloucester County Chapter of the American Red Cross for 20 years, teaching cardiopulmonary resuscitation, first aid and lifeguarding. "I think everybody should contribute to the welfare of society," said Miller, who has served as a PTA president and church volunteer as well.

How we volunteer and why we do it depends on the individual. But according to Rowan Psychology Professor Linda Jeffrey, the desire to serve others is a normal component of mental health. "I think it's a fundamental need that people have to reach out to other people, to connect with them, to give back to the community," she said.

The Rewards of Good Deeds

According to the Lions Club survey, most adults who volunteer say they feel good about helping others and feel obligated to help the less fortunate. Some members of the Rowan community are more specific about their reasons for volunteering, including—and in some cases combining—faith, self-fulfillment and personal growth.

Randazzese, who has been an active volunteer for various organizations since

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high school, admits she's not Mother Teresa. Still, she says, it's her spiritual conviction that leads her to help others. "Throughout my life I've learned that it's important to give to others, to give back," Randazzese said. "I come from a very strong, faith-filled home. I'm Catholic and get a lot of that in my religion – to follow in Jesus' footsteps, to do, in a sense, God's work."

Theodore Johnson, who retired from Rowan in June after serving as a professor of educational leadership for nine years, is a mentor for students at several schools and active in other organizations as well. He, too, attributes his extensive volunteer work in part to his religious beliefs. "There is much that needs to be done and when God breathes that breath of life into you, my feeling is that He did that for a purpose and I've interpreted that purpose to be to serve others, to try to improve the quality of life for other folk," he said.

Ron Johnson '87 (no relation to Ted Johnson), and a member of the Alumni Association Board, finds self-fulfillment through helping others. In his case, that means serving as a volunteer firefighter with the Friendship Fire Company in Woodbury for 11 years. "Volunteering is probably one of the most important things you can do for other people," said Johnson, manager of government relations for South Jersey Gas Company. "It makes you feel better about yourself."

Johnson's most memorable day as a firefighter occurred when he was just 23

and in a burning house for the first time. "It was like being in a completely dark cave where you couldn't see anything. All you had to go by was your hearing and your touch," said Johnson, who was inspired to volunteer by an uncle, friends and neighbors who were firefighters. "We put out the fire and nobody got hurt."

Chris Dickerman, associate director of Human Relations, also was inspired by others, including his 77-year-old mother who still delivers meals to "old people" through Meals on Wheels. "I grew up in a really little town where everyone knew everyone. I guess the people who coached me when I was growing up and the scout leaders who donated their time made a lasting impression on me," he said. "There are a lot of things that won't ever get done if people don't volunteer." He has volunteered for the Glassboro Little League for 16 years, among numerous other activities.

For Jessie Arnold '41, her desire for personal growth drove her to volunteer. At an early age, she wanted to explore Africa, the land of her ancestors. "I was going to dispel (myths about Africa), help children, parents, teachers, administrators, church school children," she said of her first trip. She fulfilled that first intention by giving presentations, including slide shows, to students in her Newark school where she taught.

But she never stopped. She has been traveling regularly to Africa, particularly the west coast, since 1971. She has helped support schools and churches, on her own or with other groups, and started one village on the road to constructing 100 houses over five years through Habitat for Humanity.

In 1974, Arnold built a house in Ghana, a country she had become enamored with in earlier visits. The house is her retreat but also has evolved into Unity Home Lodge, a bed and breakfast open to anyone who wants to live among people and learn the region's traditions.

Since the early 1980s, Arnold also has done missionary work in her adopted land. She worked with Calvary Baptist

Church in Accra, supporting its work with a hospital's women's ward that served outcasts. "I worked with them bringing medicines and equipment from the States—no less than 14 cases," Arnold said. American churches, physicians and families contributed supplies, but Arnold spearheaded the drives with her own money, paying to ship most of the goods and the cost of her own transportation.

Rowan's commitment to service

While individual Rowan alumni have volunteered in many ways, the Rowan community of students, staff and faculty also has a long tradition of service. Decades ago, student activists sent educational material and supplies to Uganda. Today student members of fraternities and sororities complete three service projects each semester. Last spring, the Alumni Association gathered more than 50 people to work on houses in Camden for Habitat for Humanity and plans to do it again in spring 2000. (See sidebar on page 15.) And the Student Government Association is planning the "Big Event" for next April 1 during which every student will be asked to volunteer for a project of his or her choosing.

This volunteer work is in tune with the University's mission, which includes civic responsibility. The Rowan University mission statement in part reads "Our goal is that students leave Rowan with an ongoing commitment to the improvement of their society and the wider world."

This fall, the University made a concrete move to encourage that commitment by opening the Center of Service Learning and Volunteerism. Marguerite Stubbs '63, dean of students, said the goal of the Center is to match interested students and staff with organizations seeking volunteers.

Coordinated by Julie Peterson, the Center in September brought more than 35 area organizations to campus to provide information about their work and speak with students during a Volunteer and Service Learning Fair.



Jessie Arnold '41 began her decades-long commitment to humanitarian aid in Africa with a childhood dream to learn about the land of her ancestry and educate others about it. Second from right above, she donates pharmaceuticals to a hospital.

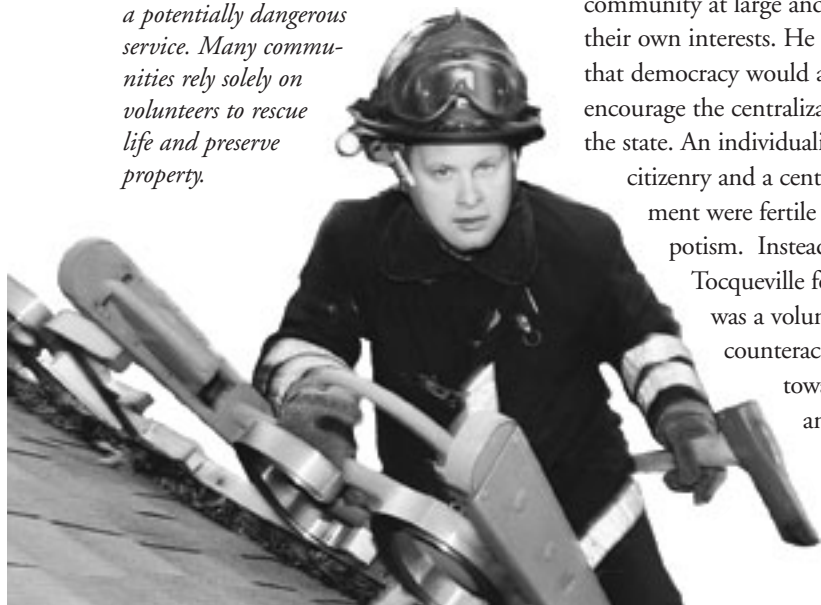
The Center, which works closely with the Volunteer Center of Gloucester County, has an important role both on campus and in the community. “It links the University with the community, but also it allows our students to apply what they are learning in the class to real-life situations, and it enhances the quality of life in the community,” Peterson said. “It makes Rowan a stakeholder not only in the Glassboro area but countywide and tri-countywide.”

Stubbs believes that Rowan students have a lot to give. “It’s important to volunteer in general to be able to give back to the community what we have received in our lifetime, the skills that we been given and the abilities we have been given,” she said. “The members of this institution have some expertise that can be used in the community, whether it’s tutoring or helping to build.”

Ted Johnson knows about giving back the skills he has acquired. In theory, he is retired but in reality, the Pennsauken resident rarely sits still. Johnson, co-director of Rowan’s Harley E. Flack Mentoring Program, is an active mentor elsewhere in the community.

He mentors eight to 10 students a year at Haddon Heights High School, his alma mater. In 1996, he started mentoring students at Lawnside Elementary School, which he attended, and today works with 14 men from Mt. Zion United Methodist Church on the program. He will soon begin a similar pro-

Fireman Ron Johnson '87 helps others in a potentially dangerous service. Many communities rely solely on volunteers to rescue life and preserve property.



gram in the Salem City School District.

“If you’re not educated today in our milieu of ‘dollar means all,’ you’re not going to have a very easy life. So my involvement is a mission to get these young people educated so that they can support themselves, their families and make a significant contribution to society in a global environment,” he said.

America’s tradition of good works

Americans have a strong history of making significant contributions to society. James Abbott, chair of the Rowan Sociology Department, explained that social thinker Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to bring attention to the spirit of volunteerism in this country through his classic work *Democracy in America*, written in the 1830s.

Tocqueville noted that throughout most of Europe either government or nobility assumed responsibility for the common folk. “What brought people together in Europe were the bonds of status or the established Catholic Church. Those status bonds did not exist here, at least to the same extent,” Abbott said. “What Tocqueville saw in America was people gathering together on a voluntary basis and doing things that needed to be done in the local communities. Everywhere he looked Americans were forming associations.”

Tocqueville envisioned that democracy’s moral emphasis on equality would encourage a narrow individualism, with people divorcing themselves from the community at large and focusing on their own interests. He also theorized that democracy would at the same time encourage the centralization of power in the state. An individualistic, self-centered citizenry and a centralized government were fertile ground for despotism. Instead, what

Tocqueville found in America was a volunteerism that counteracted the tendency toward individualism and that created a

number of “secondary powers” in society, powers which stood between the individual and government.

More than 150 years after Tocqueville’s assessment, volunteerism is still strong in this country although far from the only answer to community needs. “There has been some work recently suggesting volunteerism is waning,” Abbott said. “It says there’s a retreat into our private lives and a growing dependence on government.” But, he noted, “You never hear of a lot of volunteer groups and activities because they are informal and take place in neighborhoods that are out of the public eye.” Volunteer activities in poor neighborhoods, for example, are rarely noticed outside the community.

Over the years, volunteerism has gone through changes, Psychology Professor Jeffrey said. In the late 1960s, it was more common to see college students volunteer in political ways, which she attributed in part to the Vietnam War. Since then, college students tend to volunteer on an individual basis, with grassroots efforts. “Many, many of them are involved in altruistic capacities, but they would not necessarily be a part of social movements,” she said.

Abbott said he touches on volunteerism with his students and the functions it serves for democratic society. “I don’t think they realize how distinctive volunteerism is to our culture,” he said.

The urge to volunteer—as an individual or with a nonprofit or religious organization—is part of being an adult, Jeffrey maintains. “I don’t understand how one can be an adult member of a community without feeling a strong need to participate,” she said.

That participation may not make headlines, but ever bit helps. “There is a tremendous amount of helping going on that does not get publicized,” Jeffrey added. “I guess that’s why society keeps going while at the same time you see terrible things happening. So many good things are also happening.” ■