

Exploring Senior Altruism in Northfield

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Ethnographic Research Methods

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Executive Summary

Title: Exploring Senior Altruism in Northfield

Abstract: Researchers collaborated with the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) to paint a portrait of Northfield RSVP volunteers and their motivations for contributing to their community. From information gathered it is hoped that RSVP can increase its success in reaching out and better serving its volunteers and the surrounding community. After sending out questionnaires and conducting personal interviews, the main motivations found for volunteering were family influence, life philosophies, religious values, social contact and a search for purpose and fulfillment. In order to mobilize the Baby Boomer generation, RSVP should appeal to the desire of the seniors' individualism and flexibility by providing personalized service as much as possible. Overall, RSVP members were pleased with their experience with the organization and particularly with Deb Johnson-Schad the program coordinator.

Main Points:

- American communities, including Northfield, needs to prepare for the demographic shift that will be occurring throughout Minnesota due to the aging of the Baby Boomer generation.
- RSVP is the organization affiliated with the Corporation for National and Community Service that offers services that enable seniors of all backgrounds to give back to their respective communities.
- Seniors in Northfield generally started volunteering in between ages 20-40 or after they retired
- There was no set pattern for what sort of volunteer work was most popular or how much time was spent volunteering
- Most interviewees lead active lives and consider themselves in good health
- Gratefulness, religion, family role models and upbringing were typical motivations mentioned by RSVP volunteers
- Volunteers found that the reasons they ended involvement with non-profit organizations in the past was frustration with poor management or wanting to try something new
- Volunteers mentioned poor health or traumatic events as reasons to end volunteering completely.
- RSVP will be more successful in recruiting if they focus on seniors who have an interest in volunteering
- RSVP should focus on recruiting through personal connections of the RSVP Program Coordinator, RSVP Partner Organizations and RSVP members
- Baby Boomers are individualistic, socially driven and shy away from established organization
- To better meet Boomers needs and wants RSVP should offer personalized attention and flexibility allowing each Boomer to find a meaningful position that utilizes their individual skills

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Abstract

Researchers collaborated with the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) to paint a portrait of Northfield RSVP volunteers and their motivations for contributing to their community. From information gathered it is hoped that RSVP can increase its success in reaching out and better serving its volunteers and the surrounding community. After sending out questionnaires and conducting personal interviews, main motivations found for volunteering were family influence, life philosophies, religious values, social contact and a search for purpose and fulfillment. In order to mobilize the Baby Boomer generation, RSVP should appeal to the desire of the seniors' individualism and flexibility by providing personalized service as much as possible. Overall, RSVP members were pleased with their experience with the organization and particularly with Deb Johnson-Schad the program coordinator.

Introduction

In 2010 the Baby Boomers will begin to retire. The Baby Boomer generation is the largest, wealthiest, healthiest, most education generation of Americans up to this point in time (Jones 1980). In the 1960's, the Baby Boomers came of age. This was a tumultuous era of American history overshadowed by major events such as the assassination of JFK, Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., the first man on the moon, Roe V. Wade, the civil rights movement, Woodstock, and the Vietnam War. There were also anti-war protests, social experimentation, sexual freedom, drug experimentation, the environmental movement and the second wave feminism. Such

events formed an experimental, individualistic generation that takes interest in positive social change (Schuman and Scott 1989).

Social and political institutions must be changed to accommodate and utilize this aging resource. One organization working to benefit both seniors and communities is the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). The parent of RSVP, Senior Corps describes the program:

The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program provides an opportunity for volunteers to put their skills, talents, and life experiences into motion for others and benefit our community in the process. Engaging people age 55 and over in a diverse range of volunteer activities, RSVP volunteers meet core needs in virtually every county throughout the State of Minnesota. (United States. MN Senior Corps 2007)

RSVP achieves its mission by partnering with local non-profit organizations to develop volunteer position descriptions, offering consultations with interested 55+ community members to find the best fit for them. RSVP also offers services such as mileage compensation, liability and accident insurance while volunteering, and appreciation events.

As participants in Ethnographic Research Methods researchers were encouraged to partner with a community organization for a research project. Community involvement was encouraged as part of St. Olaf College's growing initiative toward greater civic engagement in Northfield. Utilizing a prior connection between the Rice and Goodhue County RSVP Program Coordinator Deb Johnson-Schad, and member of this research team, a partnership was established with the Northfield RSVP. After consulting with Deb about what she would like researched, the goal was to explore the motivations for altruism among Northfield seniors and their interactions with RSVP. The aim is to not only gather information about senior altruism but more importantly it is to offer Deb and

regional RSVP programs insight on senior volunteers, how they can attract more and how the volunteers can be best served.

Setting

Northfield

Founded in 1885, Northfield, Minnesota has existed mostly as an agricultural community. Northfield is home to both Carleton and St. Olaf Colleges and is situated 45 minutes south of the Twin Cities. The current population of Northfield is 19,331 and the average growth rate over the past 50 years has been fairly consistent averaging approximately 18% per decade. Historically, some of this growth is due to increasing enrollment at the colleges. College students currently account for approximately 28% of the population and have a large influence on the character of Northfield as a college town. The population of college age students should remain relatively stable due to predicted enrollment numbers. A proportion of the predicted growth of Northfield will be occurring in the 55+ age group. As of 2010, 20% of Northfield's population will be above the age of 55; by the year 2020, the 55+ population is expected to make up 23.67% of Northfield's residents. In the 20 years between 2000 and 2020, the population of over 55ers in Northfield will have doubled. (ACP Visioning + Planning, Ltd. Development Economics 2008)

Statewide Age Wave

This growth in the senior population mirrors the demographic shift that will be occurring throughout Minnesota.

“In less than four years, in 2011, the large baby boom generation—born between 1946 and 1964—will begin to turn 65, and for the next 25 years the aging of the population will dominate the demographic landscape. The number of Minnesotans over age 65 will double, rising to

1.3 million, and by 2030 older people will represent over 20 percent of the state's population. This "age wave" will usher in a permanent shift in the age of our state's population. Such a major shift in the age of our society has never happened before, and policymakers here and around the world are preparing for the both the opportunities and the challenges that this dramatic change represents." (United States. MN Dept. on Aging 2007)

"In the next 50 years, most of the growth in Minnesota's population will occur in persons over 50. By 2020 Minnesota will have more retirees than school age children. Between 2005 and 2030, Minnesota's population 65+ will rise from 620,000 to 1,300,000. The population 85+ will nearly double, rising to 163,000. Labor shortages are already visible in parts of Minnesota and will become more acute in the future." One of the Minnesota Board on Aging's main goals is "redefining work and retirement – Minnesota should encourage individuals to continue working in both paid and non-paid roles, and prepare for their retirement and old age." (United States. MN Dept. on Aging 2007)

Life as a Northfield Senior

Northfield is a town filled with opportunities for those over 55. Northfield is home to the Historical Society and Museum, the Northfield Arts Guild and Nerstrand National Park. The Historical Society and Museum puts on seasonal events and have options to curate archives. The Arts Guild has art openings and produces plays which seniors can be involved in. Nerstrand National Park offers hiking trails and outdoor activities. There are also several interest groups such as gardening and book clubs in the area. (Northfield History 2009)

Both Carleton and St. Olaf Colleges have a multitude of resources including libraries, special music and theatrical events as well as guest speakers that may be of interest to seniors in the community. They also each have gymnasiums that are open to the public for varying fees. Carleton also has a lovely arboretum that can be used for walking, biking and running- all great ways to get exercise. Since it is frigidly cold most

of the year, the Senior Center and the YMCA also have exercise opportunities for retired citizens. (Northfield History 2009)

The Northfield Senior Center's mission is "to encourage area seniors to pursue active, meaningful, and healthy lives; to invite seniors to share their talents and interest; and to offer services, information, and social, intellectual and wellness opportunities"

(Northfield Senior Citizens 2009). The Center provides Internet access, exercise facilities, general classes, group activities and events, in addition travel and volunteer opportunities (Northfield Senior Citizens 2009).

In the same building as the senior center, Northfield's Used a Bit Shoppe is operated by senior citizens where they sell used home furnishing. They encourage senior membership and "the community to recycle quality household items and provides affordable resources for individuals and families." The donations sales go directly back to the Northfield Senior Center (Used a Bit 2009).

The Northfield Area Family YMCA (NAFY) has been dedicated to establishing opportunities for the community to achieve its full potential. The mission states, "Guided by our core values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility, the YMCA provides services, activities and a supportive community that strengthens the spirit, mind and body for all" (YMCA 2009). The goals of the NAFY are to recognize community leaders, create partnerships within the community, create an environment to work or volunteer, and etc. The local YMCA pursues to create a model that establishes caring, honesty, respect and responsibility towards the creation of a community (YMCA 2009).

One reason that Northfield is attractive to seniors is that it has a wide variety of housing options. For example, Kildahl Park Pointe (KPP) is known as the first

cooperative in Northfield for adults of 55 years of age and older. KPP is owned by members and offers services, such as, a sense of community, freedom from home maintenance, members are able to contribute in decision making process, and providing affordable housing. Some places are also supported through Church organizations (Kildahl Park Pointe). The “Northfield Retirement Community is a Christian, church-related, not-for-profit organization dedicated to the development of a continuum of caring, living environments and outreach services as works of love and mercy, primarily for older persons, enabling individuals to realize their maximum physical, spiritual, psychological, and social potential” (Kildahl Park Pointe). Other complexes include Three Links Apartments and Country Club Manor. Payments range anywhere from \$335-\$1,325 per month which allows for a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Many retired citizens live in their own homes or with other family (Northfield Senior Citizens 2009).

RSVP

The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program is one of three branches of the Senior Corp organization: the Foster Grandparent program, the Senior Companion Program and RSVP. Senior Corp is a division of the Corporation for National and Community Service, “an independent federal agency created to connect Americans of all ages and backgrounds with opportunities to give back to their communities and their nation” (Corporation for National and Community Service 2009). As defined by the Minnesota Senior Corp:

The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program provides an opportunity for volunteers to put their skills, talents, and life experiences into motion for others and benefit our community in the process. Engaging people age 55 and over in a diverse range of volunteer activities, RSVP volunteers meet core needs in virtually every county throughout the State of Minnesota. Sharing the skills they have spent years developing, RSVP

volunteers put them into practice to improve the lives of many. Whether building homes for the needy, preparing income tax reports for the elderly, or tutoring recent immigrants developing their English skills, RSVP volunteers bring encouragement, hope and stability to our communities. (Corporation for National and Community Service 2009).

To fulfill its mission, RSVP provides members assistance in selecting volunteer opportunities, continued support as volunteer, free supplemental accident and liability insurance coverage, travel reimbursement, volunteer appreciation events and opportunities to connect with others (Catholic Charities). Nationwide, RSVP boasts nearly 500,000 members. Active in the majority of Minnesota counties, in 2007 alone 17,265 Minnesota RSVP volunteers contributed approximately 1,737,700 hours of service within 1,650 nonprofit or public agencies throughout Minnesota (United States. MN Senior Corps 2007).

Active across the nation, RSVP is organized into regional districts. Local organizations apply to sponsor RSVP in their region and if selected, the organization must participate in a financial match program with the grant money they receive from the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Minnesota Board on Aging. There are eight regional sponsors of RSVP in Minnesota serving anywhere from two to eleven counties. According to Deb, there is little communication between the regional organizations.

The Northfield RSVP is an area office of the Common Good RSVP sponsored by Catholic Charities Diocese of Winona. The Common Good RSVP administrates the Retired and Senior Volunteer Programs in Brown, Blue Earth, Goodhue, Le Sueur, Nicollet, Olmsted, Wabasha, Waseca, Watonwan and Winona counties, serving over 1700 members. Within the Common Good there are 7 Program-Coordinators, each in

charge of between one and two and a half counties (United States. MN Senior Corps 2007). Deb Johnson-Schad serves as the Program-Coordinator for both Rice and Goodhue counties. Quarterly program coordinator meetings are held as opportunities for the directors to share what is working with their RSVP programs and what could be improved upon along with ideas for new programs and developing new marketing materials. Program Coordinators are also expected to attend an all-staff meeting twice a year where all forty or so staff of Catholic Charities and one program will present their activities for the benefit of the leaders of other Common Good programs.

An integral part of being a Program-Coordinator is recruitment. In Northfield, connections are made using the media such as newspaper articles on current programs and radio appearances as well as personal connections within the Program-Coordinator's neighborhood and church community. Additionally, Deb addresses churches in the area several times a year. Deb also speaks at non-profit organizations and the Northfield Senior Center. Furthermore, much of the recruitment is done by simple word-of-mouth recommendations by established RSVP members. Generally, once a senior expresses interest in joining RSVP, Deb conducts a one-hour personal interview with them. During this time, she works with the senior to find a volunteer opportunity that matches what they are looking for in relation to type of work, time commitment and availability that fits their wants and needs.

As Program-Coordinator, Deb is responsible for reaching out to local non-profit organizations. For the sake of continuity, Common Good RSVP has defined five primary focus areas: fostering intergenerational experiences, providing affordable housing, promoting environmental services and issues, developing job skills, and mentoring

children with incarcerated parents (Catholic Charities 2009). Program-Coordinators are expected to have non-profit partners dealing with each focus area. Once the connection with a non-profit is made, the program coordinator works with the organization to develop position descriptions. Positions descriptions aid with recruitment because they help define volunteer needs in terms of type of work done and the times at which the work will be done.

The Program-Coordinator is also the leader in developing RSVP led programs. In Rice county Deb has set up the Reasons to Write Pen Pal program in Northfield and the Bone Builders Osteoporosis Prevention exercise program in Faribault. In both programs, community organizations such as the schools, senior centers and retirement communities must be contacted to help develop the program.

In Northfield, the Program-Coordinator also is in charge of volunteer appreciation. Deb holds a yearly volunteer appreciation event. Additionally, a newsletter is also sent out quarterly. Due to budget cuts, however, in 2009 mailings will be cut down to twice a year. Though e-mail would be more cost effective, it not an option because many RSVP members do not have access to E-mail or the Internet. When possible, Deb also takes time to sit down with RSVP members to get to know the volunteers and make sure that their needs are being met.

There are 49 members of the Northfield RSVP working at twelve to fourteen non-profit organizations. Around twenty seniors are participating in the Pen Pal program without being members. The most popular programs include Habitat for Humanity, the Community Action Center and the Reasons to Write Pen Pal Program. While some RSVP programs in the region have been functioning for fifteen to twenty years, the Northfield

RSVP became active in 2006 when Deb was hired. As a newly established program, the Northfield seems to attract younger members rather than retain older members. The average age of a Northfield RSVP member is 69, which is younger than the average age of RSVP members in other counties. Additionally, while most programs traditionally have more female members than male members, Northfield RSVP has more male members. Deb attributes this to the strength of the Habitat for Humanity program in Northfield which tends to attract more males than other programs.

Methods

Paper Communication

Prior to beginning communication with the RSVP volunteers, letters, questionnaires, interview questions and general methodology was evaluated by an ethics review board (IRB). After receiving IRB approval communication was established with subjects by sending two letters to all RSVP volunteers registered in Deb Johnson-Schad's database. A comprehensive selection was chosen to maximize the response data due to the small population size (fewer than 50 subjects).

In the first letter introduced the project and intent. It was decided to send this letter out under the name of Deb Johnson-Schad because, as the Program-Coordinator, she had already established a rapport with the volunteers in RSVP. The letters invited RSVP volunteers to participate in the research in order to benefit RSVP and their own volunteering experience. The second letter introduced us as the three student researchers and expressed enthusiasm to work with them and this organization. Due to privacy restraints, the letters were addressed by Deb before being distributed through the U.S. Postal Service.

Included with the letters was a short questionnaire. The questionnaire posed questions about basic demographics and volunteer experiences. It was clearly stated on the questionnaire that the return of the survey was an indication of implied consent to use provided data in the study.

The five questions posed by the questionnaire were:

What have been your volunteer experiences throughout your life?

What motivates you to volunteer?

What impact has volunteering had on you personally?

What can RSVP do to better engage you as a volunteer?

What can RSVP do to better support you as a volunteer?

In addition, people could indicate whether they were willing to participate in an interview or a focus group. It was decided to send out a questionnaire foreseeing that everyone would not be willing/able to do an individual interview and this way a wider range of data could be collected, especially if the questionnaire was kept short and concise.

Sixteen questionnaires were returned to Deb in prepaid envelopes and were then forwarded to us for further analysis. The data sample included nine women and seven men. The average age of the female participants was 66 while the average age of the male participants was 75. The average age of the sample of RSVP volunteers was between 70 and 71.

The Interview Process

Deb provided us with the telephone numbers and addresses of the twelve RSVP volunteers who indicated a desire to be interviewed. The subjects were then contacted by phone and a follow up interview was scheduled for ten of the twelve. Interviews were

conducted in the subject's home or at another agreed upon location based on the subject's preference. Four women and six men were interviewed.

Individual interviews were favored rather than focus groups since answers would be of a personal nature and they should be based on personal reflection rather than an integration of another individual's thoughts. One exception is a husband and wife, while the interviews were conducted at different times, both were present for each other's interview. A separate tape-recorded interview was also conducted with Deb Johnson-Schad.

Care was given to accurately collecting data. Interviews were conducted in pairs to increase the level of accuracy and objectivity because each interviewer carries their own personal subjectivity. If consent was given the interview was tape-recorded for further review of the material and to facilitate accurate use of quotations. All interviewees agreed to be recorded.

Problem

Baby Boomers

As a demographic group, the retiring Baby Boomers have a lifetime of volunteering. Many were among the first to participate in the Peace Corps and for many retiring Boomers it remains a formative period in their life (Perry 2005). Boomers' social consciousness is different than the sense of community spirit that the generation before the Baby Boomers, the "Greatest Generation," is known for. It is shown that Boomers are less likely to vote, read the newspaper and "are less apt to join churches or civic organizations" (Perry 2005). Still, Boomers are ready and willing to volunteer as long as it is "meaningful." For some Boomers volunteering promotes an "enhanced sense of

purpose: giving back to society.” For others it offers an opportunity for “personal growth: following through on an interest.” Still others see volunteering as a means of “continued productivity: providing structure to daily life.” There have also been demographic trends found in aging volunteers indicating that those with higher incomes, higher levels of education, feel connected to their communities or go to a religious institution at least once week are more likely to volunteer. Other things affect volunteer rates such as “availability of volunteer opportunities, and factors such as health, time available to volunteer, and access to transportation” (Bradley 1999). It is also shown that just because people retire and have “more time” does not necessarily mean they will volunteer (Bradley 1999).

One common theme in literature regarding retiring Baby Boomers is the idea of a “phased retirement.” People may quit their regular job, having saved enough money for retirement, and decide to use the skills they have accumulated throughout their career for social change, working paid and unpaid at a non-profit or in the public sector. Because volunteers see their work as a second career they prefer challenging work (Laurant 2006). Consequently, non-profit organizations are being forced to develop new approaches to integrating aging volunteers that utilize Boomers’ developed skills. For example, David Eisner, chief executive of the Corporation for National and Community Service imparts this sentiment, “We have non-profits that are used to thinking about hiring a consultant to develop a strategic plan, then bring the volunteers in to do the clerical work...No one's flipping it. People haven't figured out how to bring the volunteer in to do the strategic plan, then hire at a lower cost the people to do the clerical work”(Perry 2005).

Not all seniors are looking merely for an extension of their previous career. Some are willing to do clerical jobs and others are looking to try out something they have never had the time or opportunity for. Others simply go where there is need.

Recent legislation also promotes altruism in seniors. The Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, passed March 18, 2009, lowered the age of Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions to 55 so it matches with RSVP. It also “expands Service Opportunities for Older Americans and Public-Private Partnerships” by “creating two new fellowships to engage social entrepreneurs, Boomers and retirees, the private sector and Americans from all generations into service. Older Americans will be allowed to transfer their awards to a child, foster child or grandchild to help them pay for college.”

(The Baby Boomer Generation 2009) These fellowships are

1. ServeAmerica Fellowships: ServeAmerica Fellows are individuals who propose their own plans for serving in their communities to address national needs and are matched up with a service sponsor.
2. Silver Scholarships and Encore Fellowships: These programs offer Americans, age 55 or older, post-career service opportunities as well as entrance into new careers in the public or nonprofit sector. Silver Scholars will be able to earn up to \$1,000 in exchange for 350 hours of service.
(The Baby Boomer Generation 2009)

“The New York Times quotes John Gomperts, president of the nonprofit research group Civic Ventures, ‘It represents an attitudinal shift in Congress -- an important recognition that national service isn't just for the young’” (The Baby Boomer Generation 2009). This is particularly true of particular generations.

Karl Mannheim’s generational theory stems from the idea that “each generation receives a distinctive imprint from the social and political events of its youth” (Schuman and Scott 1989). The way people are organized into generations, Mannheim says, is a “social creation rather than a biological necessity” (Schuman and Scott 1989). When

people talk about how those generations are social created, it is through sharing a “socio-historical consciousness” (Schuman and Scott 1989). Because of their communal context, they may experience events differently than those of a different generation. In the case of the Baby Boomers, they grew up in a time in history full of turbulent events- assassinations, Roe V. Wade, Woodstock and the Vietnam War. There were also anti-war protests, the civil rights movement, social experimentation, sexual freedom, drug experimentation, the environmental movement and the second wave feminism. All of these events shaped the Boomer generation into a group that is socially aware, yet has a sense of independence and freedom.

CBR

Community based research (CBR) is conducted in order to produce information that has the capacity to bring about social change. In other words, research is academic civic engagement, done for the benefit of a particular community. According to the government, “civic engagement is based in the fact that all citizens can contribute ideas, energy and action for proposals for improving community and these proposals are more likely to be accepted if citizens have a role in shaping them.” The term ‘community’ in this sense can include educational institutions, organizations, and agencies that provide services to groups of residents or groups who share a particular trait. “In every case, the community consists of people who are oppressed, powerless, economically deprived, or disenfranchised-that is, who are disadvantages by existing social political or economic arrangements”(Strand et al, 3 2003). The unique collaboration on the part of the researcher(s) and community members (the participants in the study) for the benefit of the community differentiates CBR from other types of research.

In terms of anthropology, CBR puts research in a real, tangible and applicable construct. Recently, colleges and universities have been criticized for the research they have been conducting, particularly in the social sciences. The critique is that “higher education is largely failing in its efforts to prepare students for lives of social responsibility and civic and political engagement” (Strand et al, 2 2003). In the past, anthropological research was implicit of a hierarchical power relationship; the researcher would study a population as the powerful, knowledgeable researcher. CBR creates a more egalitarian relationship between the researcher and the community valuing the knowledge of all parties involved. “CBR answers the question, ‘Whose knowledge counts?’ in distinctive ways. It places the less powerful members of society at the center of the knowledge creation process. This means that people’s daily lives, achievements, and struggles are no longer at the margins of research but are placed firmly at the center” (Strand et al, 11 2003). CBR fundamentally alters the goal of social science research, from research for the sake of knowledge to using knowledge for the benefit of human beings.

Findings

Finding a Niche

Jefferson is an incredibly involved and good-hearted man. Like many of the interviewed volunteers, he did not truly begin volunteering until after retirement. He got involved with RSVP shortly after his wife passed away nearly five years ago. Between all of his volunteering activities he spends approximately twelve hours a week serving his community. He established his family here in Northfield and made a career for himself delivering petrol to farmers in the area. Jefferson has always been a people person, and

his job allowed him to make friends and interact with many members of the community. After retiring at the age of 63, he drove a school bus for twelve years, making even more friends along the way. He is still driving today, transporting between 250-300 pounds of food from Cub Foods to the Food Shelf in Northfield every week. Jefferson had no prior connections to the organization he chose to work with. In addition, he participates in special events throughout the year including a Christmas dinner at St. Johns, being in the honor guard with the American Legion, and helping with Thursday's Table dinners at the senior center when help is needed by preparing meals or being a reader. Because of his tremendous effort and caring spirit, he was recently awarded the honor of being the top senior volunteer in the state of Minnesota for contributions to the Northfield community. Though not as highly educated as other volunteers, he has proven that you do not have to have a college degree to live a purposeful and fulfilling life.

Sometimes becoming involved in volunteer work is the consequence of chance encounter. For Cheryl, this chance encounter was 36 years ago when a woman knocked on her door and asked for her support in advocating the building a group home in Cheryl's neighborhood. After becoming involved in the cause, the woman invited Cheryl to take part in the League of Women Voters. Cheryl, now a board member, has been involved ever since. Currently, Cheryl is the president of her garden club, on the board of her neighborhood homeowners association, is the bookkeeper and on the board of the Habitat for Humanity Rice County board, participates in Crop Walk, delivers Meals on Wheels and helps with clerical work once a month for a local charity. Cheryl reflects a trend found that if people started volunteering prior to retirement they usually started volunteering between the ages of 20 and 40. Though Cheryl was not religious research

found of those who started volunteering prior to retirement, many began with their religious organization.

Much of the volunteer work Cheryl does draws on her previously developed skills. After a career as a public relations director and as a fundraising consultant for non-profits, Cheryl's leadership skills, interpersonal skills, knowledge of the non-profit sector and fundraising were beneficial to all the boards she serves on. At the same time, some of the work she did, such as the clerical work or walking in the Crop Walk did not relate to any previous skills.

While both Jefferson and Cheryl some of their prior occupational skills in their volunteer work, others, such as George, did not. George had a previous career as a chemist, but spent his time as a volunteer planning neighborhood parties for special events.

Cheryl also mentioned she had been involved with other organizations but left after becoming frustrated with general disorganization within the program. She also mentioned becoming bored with an activity, which she left to try another new and exciting volunteer opportunity. Ultimately, Cheryl believes she will only stop volunteering when her health no longer allows for it. Many of the volunteers that were interviewed repeated these sentiments when discussing why they left an organization in the past. Other volunteers mentioned other reasons, such as Charles and Anne who remembered having to take a break from volunteering after a house fire and when Anne's mother was sick and required a great deal of Anne's time.

There was no real pattern in what type of volunteer work was most popular. Some socially-oriented volunteers preferred jobs with interpersonal contact such as being

involved in the Big Brother program or with the Laura Baker House working with mentally handicapped community members. Others preferred more removed positions such as building houses with Habitat for Humanity. For some, their volunteer projects related to something important in their lives such as Cheryl, who has often been involved with neighborhood causes. Others seemed to have no prior connection to what they work with, such as Jefferson, who chose to work at the food shelf. As in these narratives, it seemed the amount of time spent volunteering per week varied. In some cases, such as Jefferson at the Food Shelf, volunteer work was consistent from week to week. Many of the volunteers, including Cheryl and Jefferson, were involved with projects that were events. The time commitment varied from week to week depending on the season or needs of the organization. George, the party planner, spent different amounts of time volunteering depending on the season. Others, such as Richard who is a Big Brother in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, spends more or less time each week with his Little Brother depending on what they decide to do. This can range from attending a Twins game to hanging out and watching T.V. Some volunteers dedicated themselves to one project or organization while others have decided to divide their time among multiple projects. Because of these factors and prior time constraints it is very hard to say how much RSVP members volunteer per week.

Mobilized Lifestyles

Contrary to what some people may believe, virtually all of the interviewees live very busy lives. Days are filled with academic pursuits, physical activities, volunteer work, hobbies, part-time work, social engagements, and common interest groups. Certainly, these Baby Boomers are not sitting around twiddling their thumbs. When the

interviewees were asked how they would fill up their time if they didn't volunteer Todd answered, "I don't know, but you can't just sit in a saloon." Others responded in a stunned tone, "Well...I don't know." Some volunteers commented on how they "would watch more TV", and have trouble getting out and socializing. For these people, volunteering was a seemingly irreplaceable part of their lives; other felt however, that even if they did not volunteer they would remain active and would be engaged in the community. One respondent, Shirley, who had been retired for a year before starting to volunteer responded, "Well, I didn't have any trouble filling the day before I volunteered."

The significance of volunteering and activity in the seniors' lives may also have to do with mobility. Northfield RSVP members typically live independently in homes or apartments. As one might expect, the vast majority of seniors interviewed considered themselves in good health. One woman, Jane, who did not consider herself in good health, selected the projects to become involved in based on her health limitations. Similarly, Deb reported that there is the exception of the Pen Pal Program which typically attracts housebound members since letter writing is something they are able to participate in. For many seniors, because health was temporal, it was often reflected on and intertwined into life philosophies. Margaret told us "I don't know if I am able to enjoy things because I am healthy or if I am healthy because I enjoy things." Several RSVP members mentioned a sense of gratitude in regards to their health and felt they should give back to the community because they are physically capable. Others stated that having good health enables them to volunteer as often as they do. Quite a few volunteers

mentioned if they were to stop volunteering it would most likely be due to declining health.

Life Lessons: To Give and Receive

One of the main goals of this research is to understand motivations behind Northfield seniors' altruism. When asked to speak about what motivates them to volunteer many interviewees expounded on their developed life philosophies. One of the great things about working with seniors is the life experience that constitutes these words of wisdom. Many of the seniors were sure they had found the key to living a fulfilling life. In their minds, they had learned where the priorities in life lie.

For example, Margaret attributes much of her volunteer work as service to the Lord. She told us, "As a Christian, the Lord expects us to serve." She also saw it as an act of "paying it forward", expounding on a feeling of gratitude saying "stated "I feel very blessed in my life and the things I do are a pay back to the world." Spirituality was often found to be a key player either as an enabler or as a motivation for volunteering. Some interviewees had existential philosophies of vocation saying, "I think that's what I'm here for." One interview reported being inspired by the Church as "the Church promotes people to take the initiative in their lives." This was of course, not the case for everyone. All subjects were either Christian or non-religious. Some members were spiritual without belonging to a particular church. One person was not involved with a religious institution did see the utility of churches as facilitators for volunteer projects. In fact, many subjects did report being connected with volunteer projects via their churches.

Part of Margaret's faith she attributes to her parents. Growing up, her father was involved in church as well as being appointed the mayor of their community. Margaret

recalled how he would often use his influence to promote programs that benefit the community. In quite a few cases RSVP members mentioned that their own parents had encouraged them to give back to others and lead a life of service directly or merely by being a role model. In two special cases, RSVP members actively strive to be altruistic supportive parents and community members because they felt their parents provided pore role models. Few interviewees said that their family had little or no influence on their motivation to volunteer. All volunteers hoped to instill altruistic values in their own children.

In terms of appreciation, Margaret says she “doesn’t volunteer specifically to get appreciation” that it isn’t something she “even thinks about.” She did say that she does cook for her ill, elderly neighbor in hopes that someone might do the same thing for her mother who does not live in Northfield. She also explained that she “likes to feel needed, as if her life has a purpose” when she “sees people laughing, happy to see or say thank you” it is more than enough appreciation. In many cases, the compensation seemed to be intrinsic, fueled by the extrinsic encouragement. Many expressed having fulfillment through knowing they are making others lives better. It gives a feeling of power and worth when the senior might otherwise feel marginalized or purposeless. Other motivations include a desire for social interaction, especially by those who live alone, an escape from boredom, and not falling into a lazy lifestyle.

A Volunteer Portrait: Compensations Complex

Shirley in particular represents the complexity of the motivations for senior altruism. Shirley grew up in a small Minnesota community where “if someone needs help, you help them.” Her family was always active in the community and her mother

would go visit people in the hospital. Like Margaret, volunteering was “part of her value system and how she grew up.” Shirley moved to Northfield ten years ago and for seven years worked in accounting at the Three Links Campus though her bachelor degree is in sociology. After retiring three years ago, Shirley took a year reading, getting together with friends, pursuing hobbies, spending time outdoors, visiting her son and grandchild in Minneapolis and taking some time for herself.

Two years ago she decided to start volunteering believing that “if you are physically able you should volunteer if you have the time after retirement.” She likes people felt “very empathetic for those that have to shut into their homes and are not as blessed as I am helping them is where I is meant to be at this time.” Though she used the term blessed, when questioned about whether or not faith played a significant role in motivations for volunteering she told us that it did not have a direct influence though it probably did and logistically she had volunteered through her church in the past. She then clarified that she believed it was her small town philosophy saying she had “never known and anything different...that’s just how I function.”

Knowing she “wanted to help individuals not as able as I was” Shirley joined the Senior Companion program and currently has three lady Companions. Once a week, Shirley visits each of her Companions and does tasks such as vacuuming, taking out the trash or driving her companions to get groceries or go to a doctor’s appointment. Shirley told us she feels like she is making a difference and that “it isn’t just in the actual tasks I help with; it’s for the recipients knowing there is someone that they can depend on.” Developing close relationships with those she is helping rather than working at a more general location such as the food shelf was an expression of Shirley’s deep held

community values though her motivations are compounded by family influence, beliefs about health and purpose. Shirley feels deep fulfillment in helping her companions.

Another statement Shirley made was “you never know; service may come back to you.” Perhaps unknowingly, Shirley was referring to the sociological concept of social capital. The French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is most known for his theories regarding three types of capital- economic, social and cultural. There is no set definition of social capital, but within its varying definitions there is a central focus on social relations that have productive benefits for those involved. Adler and Kwon in their book, Social Capital: Prospects for a New Concept, talk about social capital’s influence on people. They look at social capital as “the goodwill available to individuals or groups” (Adler and Kwon 2002). Overall, social capital is the manifestation of an individual’s interactions with other people and the esteem that humans build with one another. Developing and fostering these connections with others is what builds networks and social capital. Someone with high social capital is often one that fosters the growth of networks, organizations and interpersonal relationships. In the case of the Northfield retired and senior volunteers, the ideas of Bourdieu are being enacted daily as they go out into the community and forge partnerships. The volunteers are generally helping those who are less fortunate than them, giving them a position of power and higher social capital. RSVP builds its social capital just as the volunteers themselves do through its partnerships with the volunteers and partner organizations. Additionally, George, the volunteer who plans neighborhood parties, expects that his neighbors will be there for them; helping him with activities he is no longer capable of doing such as shoveling his driveway. George seems to have an idea of having a sort of patriarchal role in their neighborhood.

In addition to social capital, Bourdieu also focuses on cultural capital. Cultural capital essentially states that people's surroundings and past experiences enables them to be more successful than someone who has not had those same surroundings and experiences. Bourdieu specifically argued that, "cultural habits and...dispositions inherited from" the family are fundamentally important to school success (Bourdieu & Passeron 1979). Those with high cultural capital generally have a strong educational history, and a higher status in society. It should also be noted that even without cultural capital, those with social capital can also achieve a high status in society. Many trends were found among the backgrounds of the volunteers that would give them a boost in terms of both forms of capital discussed.

The RSVP Advantage

One common characteristic between interviewees was their association with RSVP. Some members had preexisting relationships with Deb including three volunteers who live in the same neighborhood and several who attend the same church as Deb. In another case, a volunteer joined RSVP after being approached by Deb when she visited his volunteer site. In several cases volunteers approached Deb to join RSVP after volunteer organizations they were currently involved with recommended that they join RSVP. In all but the one case, where the volunteer sought out RSVP after reading a newspaper article regarding the organization's programs, prior personal contact existed with a partnering organization or with Deb herself.

One member, Richard, divorced and retired, was searching for a sense of purpose after his son left for college. For years, Richard had exceedingly fulfilling experiences coaching youth sports. Feeling that perhaps volunteering might fill the void he now felt

as an empty nester, Richard mentioned his desire to volunteer to a neighbor. An RSVP member herself, the neighbor suggested he accompany her to the RSVP appreciation event so he could meet representatives from local organizations. At the meeting, Richard was introduced to a representative from the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program. After signing up, the representative told Richard about RSVP and said that if he were interested Deb would contact him.

Later that week, Deb called Richard and set up an interview at which they discussed how Richard could best utilize RSVP's services. Because Richard would be working with a minor, they decided the liability insurance would be a great asset to him. Another service Richard takes advantage of is the gas mileage reimbursement he uses when he takes his Little Brother out for day trips to the Twin Cities and other locations. For Richard this compensation is "incredibly appreciated", especially in the summer of 2008 when gas prices soared to over \$4 a gallon, and in the ongoing economic crisis.

Many volunteers feel equally supported by Deb and RSVP. In Jefferson's case, RSVP pays for him to have lunch at the Senior Center each day that he works at the Food Shelf. While, Jefferson's case is rare, Deb makes the effort to personalize every member's experience so that they can receive the greatest benefit. In another instance, RSVP members involved in Habitat for Humanity such as Cheryl use the compensation money that they receive for mileage and donate it back to Habitat for Humanity. In addition, Habitat is able to provide their senior volunteers with accident insurance and all volunteers with refreshments funded by RSVP.

The Northfield branch of RSVP provides the retiring Baby Boomers with opportunities that are specific for them. One of Deb's main responsibilities is to help

seniors find volunteer positions that utilize their specific skills and that they enjoy. This is especially important for the Baby Boomer generation, who as a whole, are more content when their individual skills can be put to use for the improvement of the greater social good. When partnering with local organizations, Deb works to develop position descriptions allow for a good fit between positions and volunteers.

For some volunteers, RSVP also provides a sense of structure. Once a year, RSVP hosts a volunteer appreciation event, and all of the volunteers who have attended it said it was a great way to get appreciation, meet other volunteers and feel part of a larger volunteering community.

One unique aspect of Northfield RSVP is the partnership with the Lutheran Social Services (LSS) who sponsors the Senior Companions program. While the relationship between Catholic Charities and LSS can be territorial in some cases, Deb and Senior Companion program Coordinator John Bringewatt have created a symbiotic relationship to better serve volunteers and increase participation in the program. RSVP holds some benefits such as insurance and mileage reimbursement and (prior to recent legislation), benefits starting at age 55 with no minimum time requirement. Senior Companions offers a stipend but workers must work at least fifteen hours a week. When a senior approaches Deb or Mr. Bringewatt expressing interest in the program, they may choose to register with whichever program best suits their needs. For example, one volunteer did not want to commit to fifteen hours a week and thus enrolled with RSVP.

On the other end of the spectrum, Anne, Cheryl, Charles and George did not initially recall that they were involved with RSVP. These volunteers had little contact with the program. Anne and Charles had only joined the RSVP Pen Pal program six

weeks prior to the interview and Cheryl's gas mileage reimbursement went directly to Habitat for Humanity. It was never really established what George's connection to RSVP was, other than that, as Deb's neighbor, she had approached him about joining RSVP. Although all of the volunteers said that they would continue to volunteer if RSVP did not exist, some said that it would be more difficult to continue without the organization. It seems that RSVP is not the reason seniors volunteer, but instead provides support for those who desired to volunteer. RSVP utilizes its ability to engage community members and bring volunteers to those who need them.

Conclusion

In the research there seemed to be an intrinsic desire to volunteer among RSVP members prior to contact with RSVP. This motivation came from values instilled through family, religion, community values, previous skills, boredom, loneliness or existential crisis. It can be assumed that up and coming seniors have a similar desire to volunteer. The findings suggest that RSVP should focus on recruiting seniors who have an interest in volunteering. Analysis of collected data found the most productive way to do this was through face-to-face interaction. Many volunteers joined RSVP after being personally invited either by Deb, a friend, or an organization (either volunteer or church) they were involved with. Program Coordinators should make the most of any connections they, RSVP partners, and RSVP members have. The interviews indicated that in Northfield connections of the Program Coordinators and RSVP partners are being well utilized. Perhaps events could be held where RSVP members were invited to bring non-RSVP member friends to increase the volunteer community.

Deb mentioned that currently Common Good Charities is currently trying to decide between a one-size fits all approach to RSVP or a more flexible, personalized approach. The research reaffirmed that Baby Boomers as a distinctive generation of seniors with unique desires and needs, are better served with the latter, more flexible, personalized approach. Characteristically, Boomers are individualistic yet interested in social change. Because of this Boomers approach volunteer work seeking a position that utilizes their individual skills and interests rather than a random menial position. Deb endeavors to address this by advising partner organizations “if your staff doesn’t want to do it, a volunteer won’t want to do it either.” To best serve seniors, RSVP should continue making a strong effort to develop partnerships with a diverse group of non-profits with accurate job descriptions to better enable seniors to find their niche.

Since Baby Boomers stereotypically shy away from organizations and are intent on living individualistic lives, flexibility is also vital for pleasing the Baby Boomers. Deb mentioned the shift from volunteers searching for constant, week-to-week volunteer projects to more sporadic event based volunteering. Because of the relatively small size of the Northfield, RSVP flexibility has been well handled.

Most of Northfield RSVP members live rather isolated in their own home and volunteering is an opportunity to connect with other people. Some volunteers mentioned that they would enjoy getting together with other RSVP volunteers more often than a yearly appreciation event to foster a stronger sense of a community among volunteers.

Most, but not all, interviewees replied that the only compensation they sought was intrinsic satisfaction gained through “seeing people smile when they walk in” or other subtle clues of social appreciation. Similarly, Baby Boomers find fulfillment in seeing

some sort of result of their work. The general consensus was that volunteers, regardless of their degree of interaction with RSVP, were pleased with their experience.

For most volunteers this was the best part of all-- feeling that they are appreciated and are making a difference. This is a manifestation of the outlined goals that RSVP sets. The seniors were able to see the materialization of these goals in their own volunteer experiences. Aspects of the organization that seemed to be particular to RSVP members were the personalized nature of Deb's work. The volunteers raved about her commitment, her recruiting, the concern she has for each individual and the quality of her as a person. The value of joining RSVP is more than the insurance and more than the travel reimbursement. The true worth of RSVP is Deb and the heartfelt work she does, making sure that each and every volunteer has a meaningful experience. RSVP helped these people to find a cause that they truly care about and can be active in, the flexibility that they desire, and a place where they feel appreciated, needed and truly cared about. This is why they stay with the organization. The positive feelings that are associated with helping others, and the relationships that the volunteers build with Deb and with those they volunteer with, is the true goal behind Deb's work and RSVP.

Further Research

This research could be improved if additional quantitative data was obtained and analyzed in conjunction with these findings. Data showed initial trends in a difference in age between male and female volunteers with nearly a ten-year age gap between the average ages of the two, with men being nearly ten years older. With further testing, this may or may or may not prove to be statistically significant. It would be interesting to see if this trend occurs throughout Minnesota and even nationally. It would be also be

beneficial to continue this research in different demographic settings such as an urban area or a non-college town. Another branch of the research could be to explore race and socioeconomic class as they have the potential to be a determining factor in manifestations of senior altruism. There may be variations in the type of activities done, motivations and organization participation.

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