

The Greatest Gift

VOLUNTEERING CAN MAKE US HAPPIER, HEALTHIER, EVEN SEXIER—BUT STARTING CAN BE HARD, EVEN PARALYZING. AND THAT'S OKAY. THERE'S A FIX FOR THAT.

By Stacey Lindsay — Illustration by Federica Del Proposito



V

olunteering is good for us. Really good. Take a study published in *BMC Public Health* in 2017 that found the cumulative effects of volunteering to be linked to better mental and physical health, higher life satisfaction, and lower levels of depression. "Growing research is showing that helping others promotes happiness," says Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, and the author of *The How of Happiness*. And if that's not enough, consider that adults who volunteered at least 200 hours a year were less likely to develop hypertension, according to a study published in *Psychology and Aging*. And we'd be remiss not to mention a study in *BMC Evolutionary Biology* a few years ago that linked altruism to attractiveness. The point is: Volunteering makes us healthy, makes us happy, and apparently, makes us sexy. "Nothing feels as good as being with people, figuring out what you want to accomplish, dividing up the jobs, and bolstering each other when you meet hardships," says Annie Leonard, the executive director of Greenpeace USA. "It's an unbelievable rush of joy." But according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, volunteer rates in the US have been dropping for a decade—only about a quarter of us actually volunteer. This is not because there's a lack of desire—research shows the majority of us want to help others—but rather it's likely a lack of time, a lack of bandwidth, and that feeling of "Oh my god how can I possibly have this much to do." "Volunteering doesn't have to be an all-encompassing, multiyear commitment," says Michelle Nunn, the president and CEO of CARE. Whatever you want to support, there is a way to find the time, there is most certainly a need, and there is a community waiting to welcome you.

TO HELP CHILDREN

Consider: UNICEF USA unicefusa.org

Since its founding, UNICEF USA has empowered kids to help other kids. In schools, the Kid Power program gives students the chance to raise money for food packets to be sent to malnourished children. "Kids write me letters saying, 'This is so cool' and 'I'm the one saving a life,'" says UNICEF USA president and CEO Caryl M. Stern. The opportunities for the rest of us are every bit as rewarding.

Join UNICEF Unite: This newer volunteer group in eighteen cities (so far) invites people to fund-raise, organize local awareness events, visit local legislators, and travel to Washington to communicate UNICEF's efforts.

▼
There are more than 1 million registered charities in the United States, many of which rely on volunteers. Look to VolunteerMatch (volunteermatch.org), which connects people with local opportunities, and the Corporation for National & Community Service (nationalservice.gov) for listings throughout the country.

Shop the UNICEF Market online: "If you're going to buy a gift, buy a gift that gives back," says Stern.
Follow and post: There's a dire need for winter supplies to keep children from freezing in refugee camps, explains Stern. "The more we get the message to people, the broader the possible impact."

TO HELP WOMEN

Consider: CARE care.org

In 1945, people started sending packages of food to refugees in war-ravaged Europe. They had no idea at the time, but those care packages became what would eventually be known as CARE. Since then, it's evolved to serve more than ninety-three countries, with an emphasis on helping women and girls. CARE focuses on long-term sustainable development and, when needed, humanitarian response, explains Nunn.

Offer your talents: Writing, translating, editing, designing—CARE welcomes expertise in a wide range of skills. "We have lawyers helping us navigate difficult legal issues here and around the world pro bono," says Nunn.

Build awareness: One thousand five hundred volunteers walked four miles around the Atlanta Beltline to raise awareness of how far some women have to walk to get clean water. That is one example of CARE's Walk in Her Shoes initiative—walks held across the country.

Join CARE Action Network: You'll be informed about issues related to poverty and social justice, such as maternal health care needs, child marriage, and policy reforms to alleviate violence against women. "We have a conference every year in Washington, D.C., where hundreds of people join us to learn about these issues and lobby lawmakers," says Nunn.

TO HELP THE ENVIRONMENT

Consider: Greenpeace greenpeace.org

Some people might like the idea of hanging off of a bridge to block an oil icebreaker. Others are better at going along and posting pictures of it. And some might be more comfortable collecting plastic from their local beach. Since 1971, Greenpeace has welcomed them all. The planet is a big place, and there's always more work to do.

Join A Million Acts of Blue: This project combats the amount of plastic entering the oceans—there are programs throughout which you can advocate for companies to stop making single-use plastics, start a plastic-free community group, and lobby your local supermarket to ban plastic bags, according to Leonard.

Jump in and do: Whether you're interested in managing an event; writing an article for Greenpeace's digital magazine

buy a gift,
plies to
ns Stern.
ader the

to refu-
ne time,
ntually
re more
helping
ainable
ponse,

gning—
s. "We
es here

nteers
aware-
water.
initia-

issues
health
eviate
y year
us to
Nunn.

ridge
long
om-
ince
is a

ount
ugh
cing
up,
ags,

; an
ne,

the Green Zine, or facilitating campaign events, the organi-
zation was founded by volunteers—and always wants more.
Send a text. It's a way to keep thousands of Greenpeace sup-
porters up to date, and there's no mandate as to how much
or how little time you give.

TO ADVOCATE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Consider: Amnesty International USA
amnestyusa.org

Amnesty International USA is the antidote to the all the
times reading the newspaper leaves you feeling despondent.
The sole purpose of this organization is to help people—and
The scope of its reach is massive. "We look at human rights
everywhere on the globe," says executive director Margaret
Huang. It's daunting, but also wildly inspiring.

Become a lobbyist: It's a lot simpler than it sounds. A number
of volunteers lobby their local officials, says Huang. Amnesty
offers training to facilitate discussions between you and
the member of congress who oversees a particular issue.

Attend human rights trainings: Conferences held across the
US offer opportunities for activism against issues such as tor-
ture, forced labor, sexual exploitation, and the death penalty.

Write. Choose one—or five or ten—of this year's high-
lighted global Amnesty cases and write a letter supporting
those whose rights have been violated. It's part of an ini-
tiative that's helped free a human rights defender from a
Belarus labor camp, release a housing rights activist from
a Cambodian prison, and pass transgender rights legisla-
tion in Norway.

TO HELP ANIMALS

Consider: The Humane Society of the United States
humanesociety.org

Do you know the cats and dogs that are saved from floodwaters?
Or the puppy mills that are forced to close? Or the pigs
taken from tiny cages at factory farms? You can thank the
Humane Society of the United States for all of the above.
It's been rescuing and advocating for animals, state by state,
since the 1950s, relying hugely on its volunteers. "It's the
only way we can make the impact we have," says Kitty
Block, the CEO of the Humane Society of the United States.

Be an ambassador for animals. Reach out to your HSUS state
director. They always need volunteers to carry out events,
and they'll know what's needed in your particular state.

Give hands-on direct care. "Some people want to be there
to meet transports after we've evacuated animals from a
disaster situation," says Block.

You can make a difference—a big one. One volunteer enlisted her
friends to support a measure to put restrictions on puppy
mills. "They collected 36,000 signatures," says Block.

TO HELP REFUGEES

Consider: The International Rescue Committee
rescue.org

There are few things as humbling as seeing someone write
their first sentence in English, says Julianne Donnelly Tzul,
the executive director of the IRC's Boise, Idaho, office.

Mentor a family: What's simple to some—knowing where
to buy fresh vegetables—can be life-changing to oth-
ers. "It's an incredible thing to be able to accompany
someone through everything that it takes to be a new
American," says Tzul. People who sign up to be family
mentors get the bonus of weaving in their children's
experience as well.

Help at an immigration workshop: Spending five hours on a
Saturday helping someone prep for their naturalization
interview can change the course of a life. "We try to match
people with skills and interests best suited for each vol-
unteer job," says Tzul.

Stand with refugees: The IRC resettles an average of 10,000
refugees in the US annually. This year, it's estimated it'll
help about half that, in part because of the reduced num-
ber of admitted refugees. If you disagree with the reduced
number, write a letter to Congress.



MAKE IT COUNT

You can volunteer.
Or you can have
a life-changing
experience.
Here's how to
ensure the latter.

Don't go it alone.
A huge amount of
volunteerism is suited
for kids. "It's a double
reward: You're instilling
values in your kids
while you're also
spending time with
them in a meaningful
way," says Huang.

Do your research.
"Every organization
loves the idea of
volunteers, but make
sure they meet your
needs as a volunteer,
too," says Block.

**Explore your
options.**
Some employers will
pay employees for
volunteer hours, says
Tzul. If it's awkward
to ask your boss,
talk to your HR
department instead.

Start.
"The hardest step is
making the decision to
do it," says Leonard.

**Don't volunteer
because you think
you're supposed to.**
It needs to come from
a place of genuine love
for what you're doing—
or else it will backfire,
says Lyubomirsky.

Find an hour.
"People often think
they'll have to commit
to x amount of hours
for x amount of time
at x place," says Stern.
There are countless ways
to volunteer for fewer
hours, even from home.

This isn't a marriage.
"Don't think about your
ten-year trajectory,"
says Leonard. "Just try
something. Once you
start, you'll overcome
any intimidation."

555-239-5555 to read our guide to local volunteering opportunities.