

Value of Volunteer Service

Mary Hamilton started volunteering at the Murrysville Community Library over forty years ago, when the staff stamped cards and penciled ledgers to check out books. Today the process runs on scanners and a county-wide database, but Hamilton's experience highlights the enduring value of volunteer service. Drawn to the library by a love of reading, Hamilton found that giving her time to the library gave her the joy of working with people who were excited to pick up a new read themselves. Of course, her service, along with that of her fellow volunteers, enables the library to put books in hands, help children learn to read, and offer lectures in fields ranging from gardening to finance.

Like Hamilton, many volunteers find that the activity offers a rewarding opportunity to foster a more vibrant community and connect with people that they might not otherwise meet. That connection creates the social infrastructure that enables a community to solve its problems. People who know each other care more about one another's lives and are better equipped to collaborate. A volunteer can tell a family new to the area about schools and job opportunities. One patron can help others use technology that allows them to stay in closer contact with family members that have moved out of state.

This quality of engagement extends especially to the community's youth. For young people, even those teenagers not yet old enough for paid employment, volunteering offers a chance to learn how an institution works, gain job skills, and explore their own interests and aptitudes. Volunteering also offers a practical outlet for that common and high aspiration of the young, the desire to make a difference. Not only does volunteering allow children to have a direct effect on the world around them, it also teaches them that changing the world requires slow, deliberate, and sometimes tedious effort. Volunteers grow to understand that they are best poised to help the people that they actually know, and that the lasting change they make results not from grand gestures but from the steady accumulation of small tasks.

In addition to the social and educational benefits of volunteering, the practice of giving time in service of others directly correlates with positive health outcomes. According to a 2016 report from Harvard Health, "The Many Ways Volunteering is Good for Your Heart," people who volunteer regularly are both less likely to develop high blood pressure and less likely to become depressed. The same report indicates that volunteers exhibit higher levels of cognitive function, engage in more physical activity, and are more likely to get annual flu shots. Whether these outcomes stem from a greater sense of purpose, higher levels of social engagement, or some other factor, volunteering offers a surprising and worthwhile chance to enhance well-being.

Of all these benefits, perhaps the simplest ones are the best. Hamilton cites working with the people of Murrysville as her favorite part of volunteering at the library. She calls the place a "treasure" and encourages people to visit as soon as they can.

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