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## Volunteering: Springboard for Work, Networking

By Kelly DiNardo  
Special to The Washington Post  
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Millions of volunteers have learned that by giving, they can get a boost with their careers.

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 Volunteering: Springboard for Work, Networking  
 Finding the Right Volunteer Spot

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"When I graduated from college in 1966, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do," Steve Vetter said. "I joined the Peace Corps. I had a lot of friends who said you're going to lose two years of your life, but it led to a rich career in international development."

Today, Vetter works as the president and chief executive of Partners of the Americas, a District group that connects U.S. residents with people throughout Latin America on projects such as agricultural development and youth programs.

"About 12 percent to 15 percent of professional jobs are in the nonprofit sector," Vetter said. "Almost all the people who work in those jobs began as volunteers. It's like baseball's farm team system. You can check out an employer and they can check you out."

Volunteering presents a great opportunity for networking. Caroline Toye, founder and chief executive of Events for Everyone, both landed a new gig and expanded her client base when she began volunteering for the Herndon Dulles Chamber of Commerce (now the Dulles

Regional Chamber of Commerce).

Toye had started her home-based event planning company three years earlier and was ready to move into an office and expand the business. She volunteered to help the regional chamber with an event, and the group was so impressed that they brought her on as a regular contractor, with her own office space.

"Volunteering is such a good way to build successful business relationships," Toye said. She volunteers with the Duffy House, a safe house for abused women and children. "For me, volunteering to organize, plan and run the chamber's event was ideal because they could see what I did. It's completely changed my business. I have office space now and access to chamber members as they come in and out."

Expanding your contact base, however, is only one way volunteering can help you. For some, volunteering is a way to figure out what their next career move should be. After college, Vetter wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life, but the Peace Corps helped him discover an enthusiasm for service and development.

"A lot of us don't know what our passion is, and we're trying to find it," Vetter said. "Most nonprofits have a learning-rich environment. There's a tendency toward mentoring and guidance. They'll work with you to get those things clarified."

Volunteering also helps to broaden and strengthen existing skills or to develop entirely new ones. Yolanda Rayford worked in broadcast journalism, but when the military stationed her husband in Okinawa, Japan, the move and their expanding family meant Rayford needed to find something else. She volunteered with the base's family support center, giving workshops on a variety of topics including writing résumés and managing money.

When the family moved to Germany, Rayford volunteered with the Girl Scouts. Her responsibilities grew within the organization until she was teaching other instructors from around the world who taught other volunteers how to be group leaders. With each step up the volunteer ladder, the Girl Scouts sent Rayford for additional training. Since returning to the United States last year, Rayford has worked with Inverness Technologies helping service members transition to civilian life.

"I deliver workshops, but I am also responsible for other facilitators around the country," Rayford said. "It's on par with what the Girl Scouts trained me to do for them. I'm training the trainers. It doesn't matter where you acquire your skills, whether you're paid or a volunteer. You have them. I refined job skills and was trained in new ones because I volunteered."

Rayford regularly advises her clients to volunteer while they look for a job and to include the experience in their résumé. Several, including one woman who landed a full-time job with an organization after volunteering for them for 10 days, have reaped benefits.

"People say, 'Volunteer? I don't want to do that; it's free,'" Rayford said. "You may not be compensated right away, but down the road the remuneration is huge. Not to mention the warm feeling you have for helping someone."

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