

Guest Opinion

Pay it forward and give back with FivePlusYou concept

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by Traci Rose

April is typically a month when we celebrate volunteerism, yet this year Oregon received some disappointing news. Not long ago we were among the pioneers for individual and corporate volunteer programs. Recently our state posted a decline in volunteerism after two consecutive years of increases.

The news came from the Corporation for National and Community Service. Working with U.S. Census Bureau data, the corporation determined that Oregon's volunteer rate dropped from 34 percent in 2005 to 32 percent in 2006.

Volunteering is also down nationally, and several theories have emerged to explain the slip. Some see a wane in the volunteering surges that followed 9/11 or the hurricanes that ravaged the Gulf Coast, representing the ongoing challenge of how to engage people beyond the response to crisis.

It's something I hear frequently in my work as director of community relations for the Portland Trail Blazers. Similar to other local businesses such as Comcast, Wells Fargo, PGE and Nike, volunteerism is ingrained in our corporate culture. Our employees are given time off to volunteer and our company hosts full-day volunteer projects each year.

As a board member for Hands On Greater Portland, I know there is a wealth of need for volunteer service at hundreds of organizations serving our community. Every month, Hands On posts more than 200 local volunteer opportunities. Yet even with corporate advocacy and organizations like Hands On leading the charge, I continue to meet people who want to volunteer, but just don't know where to begin.

Here's the good news. As part of the curriculum for the 2007 class of Leadership Portland, a Portland Business Alliance program, 36 new and emerging professionals are charged with identifying community needs and creating programs that benefit them. I have the privilege of working on one of the program teams and, with five other passionate and creative classmates, we've developed a simple formula to get people started volunteering.

The concept, FivePlusYou, is the template with a pay-it-forward philosophy that can be implemented effortlessly into social, business or community circles.

Here's how it works. You recruit five people who share an interest in getting involved.

Next, your team of six connects with Hands On Greater Portland to find a volunteer opportunity that matches the group's interests and schedules. Together, the six of you will help each other experience the rewards of volunteering. As your group celebrates the difference you have made, you challenge each of them to do the same ... recruit five friends, co-workers, parents of your kids' friends, business associates. Imagine the potential to engage volunteers.

My Leadership Portland team has set the FivePlusYou wheels in motion. We tackled a volunteer project organized by Hands On at Vernon Elementary School. Joining me was Eric Brown, CEO of American Red Cross Pacific Northwest Region Blood Services; Brenda Gustafson, senior communications officer with Portland Public Schools; Debi Klinetobe, community banking president with Wells Fargo; Steve Olson, an attorney with Tonkon Torp; and Praveen Sharabu, director of infrastructure with Con-way.

Each of us will now go back to our friends and businesses to fulfill our pledge to FivePlusYou. And we challenge you to join us. Imagine the surprise of the Corporation for National and Community Service when they look at Oregon's volunteer numbers for 2007.

For more information and to get involved, visit fiveplusyou.org.

Traci Rose is director of community relations for the Portland Trail Blazers and is a member of the Leadership Portland class of 2007.