



## The Oregonian

### 'Be the change,' change yourself

Saturday, January 20, 2007

**NANCY HAUGHT**  
The Oregonian

Go ahead, help yourself -- by helping others.

Sure, volunteering is a good thing that results in plenty of intangible rewards. But there are also selfish reasons to be selfless. So says a woman whose life has been steeped in helping others and whose book resounds with hundreds of voices -- including some from Oregon -- who agree with her.

Michelle Nunn, a co-founder and CEO of the Hands On Network, says volunteering can help you:

Learn new skills.

Try out a different career.

Overcome fears (of public speaking or old age, for example).

Increase your knowledge of the human condition.

Become a more informed voter and a better citizen.

Nunn is the editor of "Be the Change! Change the World. Change Yourself" (Hundreds of Heads Books, \$14.95 paperback, 320 pages). The small book is packed with brief, lively and heartfelt testimonials, to-the-point statistics, Web sites and lists, all designed to nudge you to take the first step on what Nunn calls a journey of service.

The first step, she admits, is the toughest.

"Starting anything, especially if it is something that's unknown or uncertain, is hard," she says. "New territory is the most difficult to enter."

But first steps don't have to be giant ones. The men and women quoted in "Be the Change!" recount tentative steps and then report surprising results. A regular bike ride becomes a 100-mile trek supporting a cure for leukemia. A chance encounter with an AIDS patient inspires weekly grocery shopping. The gift of a camera develops into a photography class for elementary school students.

Far more important than what you wind up doing, and how often you do it, is that you made the first step, says Nunn. The daughter of Sam Nunn, a former Democratic senator from Georgia, grew up in a household where public service was an example lived, not an empty exhortation -- and certainly not an impulse that could be overwhelmed by the size of any particular social problem.

"I love the story about Jane Goodall," Nunn says. A Boston volunteer interviewed in the book remembers telling the renowned primatologist that she wanted to "do something" but the problems of the world were all too huge to tackle.

"Just find your piece of it," Goodall told her.

"That's all it takes," says Nunn, who advocates finding one piece of one problem or issue and doing one thing about it.

Her other favorite quotation from the book? Gandhi's call to "be the change you wish to see in the world." Do that, she says, and you will be transformed.

"Most of us have dual bottom lines," Nunn says. We may want to help others but, whether we recognize it or not, all of us could use some help.

"The common denominator between all these volunteers in the book is that they have been transformed," Nunn says. "They have benefited. They have gained more than they ever expected.

"It's amazing how much of that is tangible: the person who couldn't quit smoking until they'd volunteered at the American Cancer Society; the one who couldn't make a career change until they'd learned and practiced a new skill set."

The chorus of voices in "Be the Change!" includes a number of Oregonians, including Kim Smith, a sociology instructor at Portland Community College and a board member for Hands On Greater Portland, an affiliate of the global Hands On Network.

Smith, who began volunteering as a 14-year-old candy striper, requires her students to give and reflect on service in courses she teaches on social problems.

"Students gain a richer understanding of the course material," Smith says, "but applied work like this is important to learn about citizenship and civic engagement."

Smith says her service assignments sometimes meet with groans from students who imagine that they don't have time to become volunteers.

"But they often return to thank me, saying, 'I've taken the first step, and it was not as hard, not as scary, as I'd thought it would be.' "

Smith believes -- and "Be the Change!" testifies to the fact -- that many students continue to volunteer after they leave school or return to volunteering later in their lives, when they discover that working and family life don't quite fulfill all their needs.

For her own part, Smith has found that requiring her students to do service helps her feel better about being a teacher.

"I do believe that teaching makes a difference," she says, "but I didn't believe I was making enough of a difference. I am one person, and I volunteer as many hours as I can.

"But if I have 70 students go out and do 10 hours of service each term, I can manifest 700 hours of volunteerism. That makes a difference."

Nancy Haught: 503-294-7625; nancyhaught@news.oregonian.com

©2007 The Oregonian