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When volunteering, Oregonians pick their favorite causes instead of joining clubs

Agencies are changing the way they recruit helpers, finding people want to help with issues that move them not serve on committees

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Members of the downtown Portland Rotary club -- many gray-haired, many in suits -- fill plates with chicken, roasted vegetables and mashed potatoes and settle into a hotel ballroom for their weekly meeting. The district governor presents a philanthropy award and implores them to write Rotary into their wills. Next up on the agenda: reports on service projects, from dental care in Honduras to medical equipment in India. New members are inducted. And the guest speaker points out the city's appeal among smart, young adults.

That same night, some people new to Portland park their bicycles at the Community Cycling Center on Northeast Alberta Street and toss their backpacks onto the floor. Volunteers introduce themselves ("I'm Dan, and I like to ride on Larch Mountain," "I'm Latoya, and I like to ride in inner Southeast"). Popcorn sits on the counter; rehabbed bikes hang with price tags, to fuel programs for low-income cyclists.

"Tonight, we're doing a bunch of weird activities," announces the 29-year-old volunteer manager, a Peace Corps alumnus who moved to Portland for its nonprofit scene.

Welcome to Oregon's volunteer revolution.

People increasingly choose causes that mirror their lifestyle, rather than commit to one group for a lifetime. Volunteers might pull an all-nighter for an issue close to their hearts, but don't ask them to join a subcommittee. It's about the experience, not the institution.

The good news is, more Americans donate time to their communities than they have in decades -- especially in Portland. Only five metro areas in the U.S. have higher volunteer rates, a study shows, with Oregonians in every age group out-do-gooding their peers across the country.

But traditional service clubs must adapt or wither. They compete with a new crop of nonprofits devoted to Oregon passions such as gardening, writing and biking.

Nancy Gaston, a nonprofit consultant in Vancouver, urges groups to host day projects and ax bureaucracy. Even the term "volunteer" can be too formal.

This isn't just a trend, says Gaston, who studies generational patterns. "It's totally reshaping volunteering."

About 27 percent of Americans donate time, up from a low of 20 percent in 1989, the Corporation for National and Community Service reports. Experts speculate that the me-me-me 1980s didn't inspire community spirit -- but the terrorist attacks in 2001 did.

Portlanders feel extra charitable. About 36 percent of people in the metro area volunteer. And urban residents are more likely to volunteer than suburban counterparts, flip-flopping a national trend.

The numbers don't surprise Andy Nelson of Hands On Greater Portland, which pairs volunteers with projects. "It's part of people's identity," he says. "We're green. We bike. We volunteer." But not the way their parents did, he says.

A few decades ago, service was linked to clubs built by the GI generation: Lions, Elks, Kiwanis, Rotary. They wrote bylaws, elected officers, met weekly, marshaled good deeds and awarded scholarships. For a generation defined by its sense of duty and order, clubs fit.

This ethos applied to volunteering in general. Gaston says her mom helped at a hospital auxiliary for decades. "Some things she liked; some she didn't. But it never seemed to occur to her, 'Hey, I don't like this.' She thought, 'I'm part of the group, and I come every Tuesday.' "

Baby boomers were the first generation, Gaston says, to identify with causes over institutions. Now they retire and look for ways to use their skills. One recruiter vented to Gaston: "The boomers are driving me crazy. They want to interview me, tell me what they can do."

Meanwhile, Generation X came of age -- not idealistic, but practical. Though they clean up trails or neighborhoods, don't expect them to form committees (like GIs) or philosophize (like boomers). Gaston says many have a can-do attitude, but they also crave fellowship.

Consumer culture, too, affects volunteers. Americans fuss with iPod playlists, customize cable TV packages and order coffee drinks with six adjectives.

"It's possible to tailor all aspects of our experience," says Neal Armstrong, the Cycling Center's volunteer manager. "Why not do the same thing with volunteering?"

Here's what the transformation looks like in Portland.

Of 1,650 volunteers at the Cycling Center last year, 50 or 100 were regulars, Armstrong says. The rest show up for one-day projects organized through their jobs, drop in for a work night or help with the holiday bike drive.

Many are twentysomethings; some, boomers. They stumble onto the doorstep, Web site or online postings. The common ground: cycling. Or, as Armstrong puts it, "We have an easy story to get behind."

Latoya Hudson, a 25-year-old cook from North Portland, did an apprenticeship with the Cycling Center 11/2 years ago. Hudson got sidetracked with a poker league, but when she stopped in recently for a bike part, she remembered how much she liked the group's mission. "I decided I could sacrifice a night a week to do something I enjoy."

At the next workstation, Dan Allen uses a wrench to disassemble a recalled purple bike for the parts. He's commuted from Camas, Wash., since early February to help. After retiring from 30 years as a millwright, Allen searched volunteer gigs and decided on bikes. "People aren't interested in joining organizations," he says. "They want to do what they want to do."

Volunteers gravitate to hands-on service at Write Around Portland, which hosts free workshops for people who wouldn't normally have access -- homeless kids, prisoners, veterans. People with stories.

Margaret Malone, a 34-year-old writer and legal assistant, started volunteering after her husband's brain tumor was diagnosed. She was so touched by the support they received, she wanted to give back in a way that felt personal.

"If I didn't know what to do or how to feel, I'd write," Malone says. "It blew me away that somebody would start an organization to help people feel that same thing."

She worked on anthologies, readings and office tasks before she was picked as a workshop leader. Write Around has twice as many applicants as spots for those positions. But the leadership team -- including director Robyn Steely and program coordinator Sara Guest, former volunteers themselves -- help people find roles that fit.

Some volunteers take niche service a step further, creating their own projects and mobilizing online.

Inspired by her philanthropic sister, who died two years ago, Sheryle Bennett decided to make Easter dinner for people who couldn't afford it. She found eight families, from Gresham to Hillsboro. A single mom who works the night shift, a couple and four kids reeling from a layoff.

Friends and co-workers pitched in with money and gift cards, vegetables and daffodils. A woman who saw the project online delivered 16 gallons of milk. Bennett assembled baskets in her garage in Southwest Portland. Ham or turkey with all the fixings; for kids, crayons and jelly beans and stuffed bunnies.

"I've done big organizations," Bennett says. "I decided I wanted to see people's faces when I showed up at their doorsteps."

To stay relevant, traditional groups rethink everything from projects to marketing.

Hands On, the volunteer-match group, helps its partners adapt. They'll get more interest with drop-in projects -- and without elaborate orientations or titles. Volunteers "don't want to be first vice president for membership," Nelson says.

Rotary leaders have their work cut out for them. Of the downtown club's 344 members, fewer than 10 percent are 35 or younger. Bob Broad, who leads an effort to recruit young professionals, says the club combats its stereotype: "Old. White. Male."

Broad hopes to make the Web site more hip and current. But a big part of the challenge, he says, is simply spreading the word about the club's good deeds, from helping local children to working on global water issues. "We can bring some momentum, some know-how, some resources behind whatever somebody's passionate about," Broad says.

At 30, Zoa Woodward is one of the youngest Rotarians. She grew up in a Rotary family and likes the array of projects. "You hear people saying, 'Oh, you're doing that? That sounds so cool.' So you just invite them to lunch."

The Elks, too, are on the hunt for members. Gene Jaramillo, who represents eight Portland-area chapters, joined the Gateway lodge in the late 1960s, when he was in his early 30s. There were 3,300 members, many his age. The ranks have fallen to 1,800, and almost everyone is older than 50; some lodges skew even older.

Lodges have opened sports bars for young people. "I call them young, anyway," Jaramillo jokes. "People in their 50s." Youth programs -- scholarships, sports tournaments, scouting partnerships -- are chances to recruit parents in their 40s. And open houses showcase projects, such as visiting veterans in the hospital or helping at a camp for speech-impaired children.

"Traditionally, we couldn't blow our own horns," Jaramillo says. "We've realized our order is in deep trouble."

Gaston, the volunteer consultant, sees a silver lining.

Today's teens and twentysomethings seem to be another civic generation. Millennials travel in packs and like to organize, Gaston says. She predicts they'll reinvent traditional clubs -- and launch their own. "They'll just look different."

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