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Sometimes it takes patience and persistence to capture . . . The Joy of Giving

By Derrick Henry May 30, 1998

RESOURCE WEB SITES

United Way of Metro Atlanta: www.unitedwayatl.org

Hands on Atlanta: www.handsonatl.org

Project America: www.project.org

America's Promise: www.americaspromise.org

Stone Soup for the World: www.soup4world.com

BOOKS

Stone Soup for the World: Life-Changing Stories of Kindness and Courageous Acts of Service by Marianne Larned

It takes more than desire to be a productive volunteer. It also takes patience, persistence, purpose --- and reparation. Just ask Shavette Neal of Marietta. After testing the volunteer waters of Atlanta, Neal decided to take the plunge by getting involved with "Helping Hooves," a project that teaches disabled children horseback riding. "I found that there was more involved than I expected," Neal says. "I'd ridden horses a few times and thought I was OK. But I quickly learned I wasn't that good. I was scared."

Malikah Berry also wanted to help others. One of her first tasks as a volunteer was to help build a house with Hands on Atlanta. "I hated it," she remembers. "I wasn't big enough to do it, and I didn't like working so hard." Thousands of people in metro Atlanta each year want to become part of the volunteer community but quite often don't have a clue how to go about finding a task that is both helpful to others and meaningful to themselves.

Officials stress potential volunteers should spend time doing some homework: learning about specific volunteer agencies and determining what they hope to get out of volunteering. A few useful questions to ponder, suggests Marni Bognar, an information and

referral specialist with United Way 211, include: What sort of work do you like to do? Do you like to work inside or outside, alone or with a group, with kids or seniors? What kind of hobbies do you have? Do you have special skills? How much time can you devote and what hours are you available? Is there a particular cause you identify with? What do you hope to get out of volunteering? Are you looking to meet people, learn new skills, obtain leadership experience?

"You need to be honest with yourself about the reason," says Kathy Klatt, president of the Junior League of Atlanta. "Don't pick something just because it's around the corner or the hours are perfect. Pick something where you believe in the mission." For instance, Klatt got involved with the Wellness Community, a support group for cancer patients, after her own bout with cancer.

And Katy Pattillo, who has volunteered in a wide variety of tasks since childhood, focused most of her attention on children's issues after she began a family. She's been involved with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Atlanta for over a decade, the past two years as board chairwoman.

Klatt suggests beginning volunteers start slowly. "Do a little trial period," she says. "You need to figure out what works best for you before you hook yourself into a long commitment." And know your limitations. "I was donating so much time in the hospital as a chaplain with dying patients that it became overwhelming," says Wellness Center volunteer Steve Ward. "I took away too much of their problems. Now, when I deal with people with terminal illness, I limit my time. If you don't learn when to back down, it can wreck your own life."

Often bad experiences can be attributed to the agency itself. Volunteers need to be properly trained and to work in a well-organized, appreciative atmosphere. "Time is very limited these days," says Anne Holbrook, who volunteers for the Greater North Fulton Education Force, where she helped develop a program to prepare preschoolers for kindergarten. "You need to know there's a specific and directed purpose."

A new national study by United Parcel Service indicates that while 38 percent of the population would like to do more volunteer work, the primary concern among volunteers is that the organization make good use of their time. Indeed, 40 percent of

volunteers have stopped volunteering for an organization because of poor volunteer management practices.

Still, when you connect with a satisfying task for a worthwhile agency, you will know it, says Pattillo. "Sometimes I wonder if I am doing the most effective thing," she admits. "But little things happen that reinforce you. I remember one day I was riding in a taxi and the driver told me how much a Boys Club had affected his life . . . You will get asked to do a zillion things, but you have to listen to your heart."

After initially stumbling, both Neal and Berry have become happy and productive volunteers. Berry found other, more suitable projects with Hands on Atlanta and today is the organization's leadership development coordinator.

Neal eventually became involved with a transitional home, 830 Boulevard, for homeless and low-income people. The work has been worthwhile and meaningful. "It was always in the back of my mind to do something," she says. "I don't have a lot of money, but my grandmother said there's a lot you can do with nothing. And I can give time."

Katy Pattillo is chairwoman of the board of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Metro Atlanta. She began doing volunteer work with children when she was 12. She is shown with kids from the Brookhaven club.