

Volunteerism as Retirement Plan: This Untapped Resource Transforms, Enriches

By Andy Buck
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At 59, just two months into her long-anticipated retirement, Donna LeValley was bored.

"I was twiddling my thumbs, looking for something to do," Donna explained. "Don't get me wrong: I was happy to be retired. But I can read and watch only so much TV before I get restless."

Donna is not alone in having "retirement fever." For 32 years, she'd dedicated much of her energy and time to her job with the state; and that dedication paid off when she was able to retire early with a healthy pension in tow. Still, the adjustment from working to restless was a quick one.

"I'd made a list of projects I wanted to complete when I retired. I finished them all within two weeks. Then I thought, 'So now what?'"

That's when Donna decided to become a volunteer—a decision that Donna claims "changed my whole life."

Much has been made in recent years about the oncoming flood of baby boomers entering retirement, and the strain that they will put on the economy, workforce, and healthcare systems. But for years now, nonprofits and charity organizations have recognized that retirees have a vast amount to offer as volunteers.

"For starters, our senior citizens have a wisdom and perspective that few others have," says David Balch, President of United Way Capital Area. "That wisdom—about the community, about how to get things done, about where our priorities should be—is an invaluable and often untapped resource for nonprofit organizations."

And so Donna LeValley, a little bored and full of love for her Austin neighborhood, signed up with Hands On Central Texas (www.handsontexas.org), the community

volunteer center at United Way that matches would-be volunteers with volunteer projects.

"Becoming a volunteer, especially for senior citizens, is what you make it," explains Fred Lugo, Director of Travis County RSVP (Retired and Senior Volunteer Program). "If a retiree simply wants to fill up some time by helping a local women's shelter organize their supplies and stuff envelopes, we can help. If they would rather join an Advisory Board or committee for a local environmental group, we can help. If they want to invent their own project, we can



help there too. The bottom line is that every retiree has time, talent, and treasure to offer. It's a win-win situation."

For Donna LeValley, it was all about neighborhood clean-ups. For years, she'd watched as her south Austin neighborhood, and the small park at its center, grew dilapidated. Now that she had the time and energy, she was going to change that. So with the help of some neighbors, Donna organized a "Clean the Neighborhood Day," which drew over 50 people to help mow lawns, pick up trash, move larger debris and overgrowth to the city dump, and repair the playground equipment and install new safety light at the park.

"It looked great by the end of the day—like the neighborhood I remember from years ago," she said.

Studies suggest that retirees who become active volunteers often dedicate more time

than other volunteers. One reason is obvious: They have more time. But Armando Rayo, director of Hands On Central Texas thinks there's something else to it. "I've been directing volunteers now for almost a decade, and senior citizens are without a doubt the most energetic group I've seen. They understand not only the importance of civic engagement, but they also have the organizational know-how to get things done well and on time."

However, the same studies that prove senior citizens dedicate more hours to volunteerism also show that they volunteer at a lower rate than the rest of the population. Rayo thinks that's because volunteerism—as a part-time and ongoing endeavor—doesn't occur to them. Rayo says the challenge is to shout from the rooftops that our community depends on volunteers to fill in the gaps.

LeValley has another take on it. "I guess when I was working, I didn't have the time to stop, look around, and ask, 'How can I give back as often as I should have?' Now she says she has nothing but time, energy, and imagination and feels volunteering will be as much her legacy as my children and grandchildren."

After her successful "Clean the Neighborhood Day," Donna jumped right into her next volunteerism project: starting a campaign to collect new and used toys for children suffering from terminal illnesses at local hospitals. When she mentions this new project, she grins.

"This is the best way I can think of to spend my days...far more rewarding than soap operas."