

Volunteers Find New Ways to Put Their Helping Hands to Work



AP

Actor and activist Sean Penn helps earthquake victims in Haiti in 2010

FAITH LAPIDUS: I'm Faith Lapidus.

BOB DOUGHTY: And I'm Bob Doughty with EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English. Today we tell about interesting and sometimes unusual work provided by volunteers across the world.

(MUSIC)

FAITH LAPIDUS: There is an old saying about volunteer work that goes like this: "No one can do everything, but everyone can do something."

Today, many people volunteer their time and energy to help others. There are a lot of ways to meet other people's needs, and it seems there is a volunteer group for everything. Some provide education, while others offer adventure. Many do both.

For example, some volunteers provide emergency help after a catastrophic event or disaster. Others are happy to get dirty while repairing homes or planting trees or flowers in poor neighborhoods. Young people see suffering and loneliness

around them and find ways to help. And history lovers help archeologists search for ancient objects to help deepen knowledge of the past.

BOB DOUGHTY: Why do people offer their services to others at no cost? Mental health expert Jonathan Crook says many volunteers want to return goodness for goodness. The North Carolina man says people sometimes cannot repay a person who has helped them. That helpful individual may no longer be part of their lives. But Mr. Crook says they can always offer kindness to someone or something else.

JONATHAN CROOK: "Somebody did something for me, at one point, and [I] cannot pay them back directly. But I can pay them back indirectly."

Mr. Crook says this happens often, especially to people with strong religious or spiritual beliefs. Or they may have suffered difficult experiences and are thankful for getting through them.

JONATHAN CROOK: "They just feel like they have been really blessed in their life and they are living this really rich life. There is kind of spiritual motivation, I think, a lot of times."

FAITH LAPIDUS: He adds that some people volunteer to help find a job or career. For example, young people may serve without pay in a free health center. The main reason may be to help decide if they would want to become a health or social worker. Or, for some, the reason may be more to help themselves. They may give their time to an organization in hopes that their employers will notice their work and improve their career paths.

(MUSIC)

BOB DOUGHTY: Some volunteer workers may offer special skills, like an ability to do rescue and recovery work, or caring for the injured. Others may perform services like passing out clean clothing or bottles of water to storm and fire victims.

The not-for-profit group Habitat for Humanity helps communities with projects like "A Brush with Kindness." Under this program, people in need can ask for home-improvement services like painting and minor repairs. Habitat volunteers donate both money and labor to the projects.

Its volunteers also work in many areas around the world, including Haiti. More than two years have passed since a 7.0 earthquake shook the nation. The exact number of people who died may never be known. Estimates gave numbers from ninety-five thousand to more than three hundred thousand.

FAITH LAPIDUS: Thousands of survivors of the Haitian earthquake still live in temporary shelters. Last year, former American president Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, joined five hundred Habitat volunteers in the town of Leogane to build houses.

Actor Sean Penn went to Haiti soon after the quake. He provided assistance in a number of ways. Among them, he helped establish the aid agency J/P Haiti. Today, the J/P Haitian Relief Organization is supervising the Petionville camp and nearby Cite Maxo camp. Last month, Sean Penn received the two thousand twelve Peace Summit Award from a group of Nobel Prize winners.

About twenty thousand homeless people are still living in the camps. Officials say they need volunteers, especially people with medical training.

(MUSIC)

BOB DOUGHTY: Organizations do not have to be large to get volunteers. An activist group in Dharamsala, India is a good example.

Jodie Underhill from England arrived in northern India several years ago. She planned to volunteer for an environmental project. She found a lot to do in the land of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. She could almost not believe how much garbage was ruining some of the area's most beautiful sights.

JODIE UNDERHILL: "It was still shocking, and it is still shocking to me after three years."

Ms. Underhill learned about waste control by cleaning up garbage while taking part in other volunteer projects. But soon enough she formed her own group, Mountain Cleaners.

JODIE UNDERHILL: "I just decided to start my own thing. My first clean-up was pretty ambitious. We had over a hundred volunteers."

The young Englishwoman says the Indian media started calling her "Garbage Girl." And she says she was pleased with the name, not insulted.

FAITH LAPIDUS: Since two thousand ten, Garbage Girl and her Mountain Cleaners have been collecting and cleaning up waste at the Triund camp. Thousands of visitors pass through this area in the Indian Himalayas each year. And many leave unwanted evidence of their visits – papers, bottles, all kinds of garbage.

The volunteers work just below clouds that seem to sit on the mountaintops. After they collect the garbage, they load bags of it onto mules. The animals then take it down the mountain.

Ms. Underhill says objects that can be recycled are given to local workers, who can make money from them. Material that cannot be re-used goes to a container specially designed to hold waste. Before the Mountain Cleaners arrived, the garbage would have been thrown down the mountainsides. Or it might have been burned, polluting the air.

Ms. Underhill says the work is very hard. But she praises the group's efforts as a wonderful experience. She says she treasures the time around their campfire in the Himalayas.

(MUSIC)



Stuffed Love

Sarah Dynia, left, and Christine Olson

BOB DOUGHTY: American teenagers also volunteer in many ways. Two girls from Illinois found an unusual way to make life more pleasant for sick and homeless people. Sarah Dynia and Bridget Regan love to sew. In late two thousand ten, they decided to make stuffed animals for people who just might need a cheerful gift. The girls took the resulting bears, cats and starfish to patients in nursing homes. They called their products Stuffed Love.

That experience was just the beginning. The girls made pillows and other things for military veterans at a treatment center

and adults with developmental problems. This past December, they made five hundred stuffed animals. Sarah stayed up all night on the night before Christmas to finish the job. Stuffed Love was sent with turkey dinners that a local restaurant was providing for poor people.

The Chicago White Sox baseball team honored the girls' efforts with an award for their volunteer work.

FAITH LAPIDUS: Every year, many people offer to find or document remains of lost societies and communities. These efforts take place across the world. For example, Forest Service experts and volunteers are working in the San Gabriel

Mountains of southern California. They are looking for information about prehistoric and historic settlements of native Californians.

This kind of work interests Steven Ortiz of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Every other year, he leads an archeological dig in Israel. The dig is at Tel Gezer, halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Professor Ortiz directs the activities at Tel Gezer with Samuel Wolff, an Israeli archeologist.

The experts, students and volunteers are hoping to learn more about the ancient city of Gezer. The city is linked to King Solomon, who appears in the holy writings of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Volunteers for the digs must be eighteen, although children may take part if they are with a parent. The youngest volunteer on the team is Steven Ortiz's ten-year-old son.

BOB DOUGHTY: The work takes time, patience and often, muscle strength. The ground may be hard and the sun may be hot. Why do people pay to volunteer to work? For some, he said the dig is a religious pilgrimage. But there are a number of other reasons.

STEVEN ORTIZ: "Some just value ancient history, and they want to be a part of unveiling it. I tend to think we attract people who think they want a cross-cultural experience. They want to do something meaningful ... a contribution to scholarship. They want to get their hands dirty. And they want to have a fun experience touring a foreign country."

Steven Ortiz said volunteering for the archeological dig provides all those things, and more.

STEVEN ORTIZ: "You are helping science. You are helping history. But on the weekends, you get to have fun, and you get to travel the country and see sights you do not normally see."

And, he says, the archeology group becomes like a big family.

(MUSIC)

FAITH LAPIDUS: This program was written by Jerilyn Watson. I'm Faith Lapidus with Bob Doughty. Our producer was Mario Ritter. Join us next week for another EXPLORATIONS in VOA Special English.