

# The Immeasurable Value of Volunteerism and the Story of One Amazing Volunteer

Susan **Kohn** and Diane **Wohl**

*When you are kind to others, it not only changes you, it changes the world.*

~Rabbi Harold Kushner

*A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

~Margaret Mead

Voluntarism is a core Jewish value and a traditional way for Jews to be engaged in their communities. The concepts of community service, *tikkun olam*, and social justice all serve as important methods of involvement and connectivity between and among the local and global Jewish community. Volunteer experiences have proven to “strengthen the Jewish and philanthropic muscles of participants, especially if the service is meaningful, regular and enriched by a Jewish educational context. In all likelihood, Jewish participants accrue additional benefits in terms of strengthening the commitments that bring them together in the first place: Jewish identity, philanthropic generosity and an actionable desire to help one’s community” (Cohen, 2001).

*Tikkun olam* implies action that leads to bettering the world. Service to the community has both the potential to deeply affect those being served while empowering individuals to care for one another and to strengthen their communities. Service opportunities also help educate community members about critical social issues and impel them to further action.

By their very nature, service programs under Jewish sponsorship attract Jews who are more Jewishly engaged, who are more philanthropically inclined, and who are more prepared to volunteer their time to make the world a better place. Inevitably, their socializing, *schvitzing*, and saving the world together can only serve to reinforce the positive norms that attracted them to Jewishly sponsored community service in the first place.

Voluntarism is a building block of Jewish social capital. It has multiple positive outcomes and provides a strong return on investment of resources:

- Volunteering empowers the volunteer and develops trust and reciprocity between individuals.
- Volunteering empowers institutions to build and sustain community.
- Volunteering in a Jewish context strengthens Jewish identity and commitment to the Jewish community.
- Volunteers involved in faith-based activities feel more connected and give significantly more time and money.

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*Susan Kohn* is Executive Director of the Volunteer & Leadership Development Division at the UJA-Federation of New York.  
*Diane Wohl* is a lifelong volunteer for the Jewish community.

We live in a period of unprecedented prosperity. At the same time, our economy today highlights the increasing disparity between rich and poor. As this trend continues, the imperative for the Jewish community to demonstrate its commitment to repairing the world grows stronger.

By fostering activism and service among Jews, we can stimulate new energy to work on what ails society and, concurrently, build Jewish communities that are caring, connected, and inspired. We can help Jews connect Judaism to activism and perform service through Jewish vehicles.

Below, Diane Wohl chronicles a lifelong commitment to volunteerism and community service. As you read about the legacy she has already created and the extraordinary way she continues to contribute to the Jewish community, you will come to realize that each of us has within ourselves the chance to make a profound difference in the world.

S.K.

My story of a lifetime of volunteerism begins in Brooklyn in the mid-1970s when as a young mother I was introduced by a friend to B'nai B'rith Women (now known as Jewish Women International) and its Genesis chapter. In my childhood, I always had a strong connection to my heritage and therefore felt very comfortable in my new role as a volunteer. The questions that then faced me were, How much time do I want to commit, and how much time do I have to commit?

I had three young children and they needed me. As I was about to accept a vice presidency of the Genesis chapter, my husband told me that it was time for us to move from Brooklyn and to the suburbs. And so in 1977 I began another chapter in my life as a volunteer. Within a month of our move we became members of a Conservative synagogue, and by late autumn I was introduced to the synagogue's Sisterhood.

Little did I realize that my involvement in the Sisterhood would be both the beginning and continuation of one of my many journeys of Jewish maturation and my life as a volunteer. The satisfaction and achievements I have derived from my association with Women's League for Conservative Judaism are indescribable. Over the years I have been both a Sisterhood president and congregational president. I have stayed involved with Torah Fund, which is considered the fundraising arm of the Women's League. These women have volunteered both time and money; as a group, they have created a major gift level within Torah Fund that is a little lower than the Lion of Judah giving level at federation.

In the autumn of 2009 I was asked and agreed to become a member of the Board of Trustees of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), an honor I so appreciated. I was thrilled, and it became even more important to me after going on a JTS trip to Israel. I so appreciate being a partner and volunteer at JTS, an institution of higher Jewish education and ordination of rabbis and cantors, as it moves ahead into the 21st century. It has truly cemented my feelings and relationship with an institution that I thought I knew about, but have come to realize has far more depth within its walls and the scholarship that it both produces and shares. I also cherish my service as a board member of List College, the undergraduate school at the Seminary, which offers a four-year dual degree in Judaic Studies to those attending the Columbia School of General Studies and Barnard College.

Other new doors of volunteerism opened to me in the early 1990s. A neighbor and dear friend invited me to a Long Island Women's Campaign meeting for UJA-Federation of New York that she was hosting and the rest is history. It has become a whirlwind relationship. Each meeting and speaker were more exciting than the one before. My volunteer life was expanding, and I was so happy to be able to give more time and raise my gift. I was able to meet new friends and famous speakers, such as Yael Dayan and Ruth Gruber. I was like a kid in a candy store, wanting to learn more and meet more people who would open great vistas of learning. And that happened—and it happened through missions. My first was a Mega-Mission in 1990, followed by a Women's Mission to Budapest, Prague, and Israel in 1991 that I co-chaired. By March 1993 I had become a Lion of Judah at UJA-Federation. It was a very special day for me and one of my proudest moments as a volunteer and funder because I so believed in the mission of the women, which continues to this day. I also became a Lion in Israel as my commitment to Israel was and still is so strong.

I learned on these missions that the world is not a perfect place, that people are in dire need, and that both they and their communities need our help. How does one bottle the feelings, the stories of the people you encounter from around the world and your own backyard? The laughter and the tears? We don't have to. We have to share them. Bring others along with us. We all need a network behind us. In around 1996, I was asked to oversee a network of women and become the Long Island Women's Campaign Chair. Several years later I became the Overall Major Gifts chair. Along the way were other committees to volunteer with, including a six-year stint on the UJA-Federation Caring Commission. The Commission led to numerous trips to Israel to provide us volunteers a better understanding of where our dollars were going by meeting the people who benefited from our grants both in Israel and in New York and showing us the impact our dollars are making.

My federation journey as a volunteer continued as it introduced me to the world of Hillel when it became part of our family of agencies. Hillel is synonymous with our college campuses. I have always called it the last frontier in keeping our children connected to their Jewish heritage. Today Hillel is the gateway to just about all areas of Jewish life, the most important over the past decade being birthright Israel. This free trip has brought more than 225,000 college and post-college young adults to Israel. I began my Hillel career at Hofstra University where I am still involved on their community board. After numerous lay leadership meetings out of town and meeting Richard Joel, the president of International Hillel, he asked me to join the International Board of Governors. As a member of that board I was afforded the opportunity to sit on the Task Force for our Hillels in the Former Soviet Union. It was there that I developed an understanding of the needs of our Jewish brethren who were denied the opportunity to be openly Jewish. Who could have imagined that American Jews would be welcomed in a country that had closed its doors for decades to the Jews and was now allowing them to be free? One does not walk away from such an opportunity: one embraces such an opportunity and builds on that opportunity. We now have 27 Hillels in the FSU and Russia, thanks to the Charles and Lynn Shusterman Foundation and the Jewish Agency. I then joined the National Board of Hillel where I currently hold the position of Vice Chair and co-chair of our Hillels in

Israel. I am thrilled to begin this new venture that has 11 Hillel sites. The excitement and joy of meeting varied types of Israelis from different cultural backgrounds is such a gift. This opportunity will give me a chance to make a difference in the lives of Jews who are living in the land of Israel but who are bereft of Jewish history and, for many, a religious connection.

My connection to National Hillel led me to meet two wonderful men. The younger man is the age of the older of my two daughters. He is the international executive director of BBYO (B'nai B'rith Youth Organization); the second is his former boss who is now the chief development officer of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).

At a breakout session a couple of years ago at the BBYO Convention in Chicago, I learned about the Partisans. These brave young women and men, most in their teens and early twenties, fought side by side in the forests of Russia and Poland against the Nazis. Today I am actively involved with the Jewish Partisans Educational Foundation. It is with the USHMM that I have traveled to Poland and Berlin, to Prague and Vienna, and to Romania and Paris over the past three years, and proudly, my husband's and my names are on the Donor Wall in the Hall of Remembrance. The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, through its educational programs, has given teachers the tools to help teens of all faiths better understand a time in history that is so remote from their everyday lives; the hope is that, through this understanding, they will emerge as strong, confident, and caring adults. I am thrilled that my time and effort are making this possible. My trips with the USHMM, as well as the lectures and exhibits, have broadened my knowledge of what has been accomplished to combat hate and all that still needs to be done. Yet it is not only what I have learned but also the people I have met along the way. One such person is Father Patrick Desbois, who is truly a man of extreme humanity and kindness. He has spent the last decade seeking out witnesses to the Nazi atrocities committed against the Jews and others. I look forward to traveling with him and the USHMM to the Ukraine in 2011.

Through friendships made within my volunteer work within the Women's Philanthropy at UJA-Federation I was introduced to Limmud FSU by a dear friend and extraordinary leader. I continue to have the joy of being a part of an educational program that over the last five years has changed the lives of thousands of young emerging Jews living in the FSU and Russia; they continue to produce community mini-Limmuds on their own, in addition to being active in the country-wide conferences that attract anywhere from 750–1,000 participants each year. The 27 Hillels in the FSU and Russia Limmud have added another dimension to their lives. I am proud to report that we are now holding our third Limmud FSU in Israel for Russian-speaking Israelis. Imagine having the opportunity to meet Russian Israeli soldiers who are given the opportunity to come to Limmud and to find out that they are taking conversion classes in the army because many of their mothers were not Jewish. It seems that everyone benefits from one program or another.

I help to support Masorti Olami's Marom movement in Budapest that engages young adults to find their own Jewish path through cultural events; this work is part of the process of bringing more young adult Jews into the fold in other areas in Europe. Recently, at the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America I had the pleasure of meeting a Hillel student whose

American parents made *aliyah* to Israel before she was born. I look forward to this new relationship in which we have much to learn from one another. Age should never be a barrier. For me it is a door to understanding. Recently, I reconnected with another former National Hillel professional who works for another Jewish organization. I, in turn introduced him to a friend that has an apartment in Israel. She is now helping his agency in Israel whenever she is there. It is all about connecting people—the *keshet*!

As I was getting my feet wet with our Hillels in the FSU, I came upon an article in a magazine highlighting an organization that was helping women in the FSU emerge as leaders and have a voice not only for themselves but their families as well. (More importantly, they were offering the cutest tote bag for a small annual gift.) The organization, Project Keshet, opened a different view of life in the newly formed states of the former USSR. To experience the joy of bringing a Torah to a community that had not seen or touched one in decades cannot be imagined. To know that we helped develop more than 150 communities of women that now have confident leaders because of our Leadership Training Development grants and the wonderful staff we have on the ground, and who have the opportunity to study Jewish text, is something to shout about. And now we have expanded into Israel to help the Russian women who have made *aliyah* so they can feel connected in their new homeland.

Turning back to the New York community in which I live, one of my most memorable moments was acting in the play, *The Vagina Monologues*, which was directed by F·E·G·S on Long Island. As part of F·E·G·S' work in the area of domestic and family violence, this play was seen as an important way to get the message out to as many people as possible. The play was performed before a sold-out crowd at Town Hall in New York City and starred women volunteers at UJA-Federation. It was then time to be performed on Long Island and to involve the volunteers involved in the Women's Campaign there. By acting in this show, all of the women volunteers became closer to one another. This vile situation that was being perpetrated on innocent women who suffered untold abuse by both the hands and words of those who can neither control their personal anger or their insecurities, but take it out on others, was realized in a way through our reading the monologues, which left us with an unimaginable sadness. It was an experience not easily forgotten. We hope to revive the production with our daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters, and mothers at some time in the future.

I almost missed out on a wonderful volunteer experience when I debated about attending F·E·G·S' Employment and Career Transition Service day. It was put together by the Advisory Group of the UJA-Federation of New York Women's Philanthropy. I must admit I was fearful because I didn't think I could be of help to women who were out of work, because I myself had not been in the working world since 1969. But I immediately engaged with the women— these brave women, these highly qualified women who possessed strong backgrounds in their field of endeavors, who were willing to listen to me, who were willing to speak to me. These women were opening up to other strangers like me because they just wanted a compassionate ear and help and thoughts about how to secure a job. What they wanted was encouragement. I was so sure I could offer that, but not what was truly needed because I never had experience in helping them find work and here it was being foisted on me. Yet I left with the knowledge that we

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all have something to offer to one another. It was an eye opener to realize it was their courage and their smiles that helped me to be of help to them, even in a small way. Nothing is certain in life, and no one knows where he or she will be tomorrow. I proudly hang the photo that was taken of our Advisory Group as a reminder of that special time.

Last year I was thrilled to be honored as a volunteer along with my daughter by the UJA-Federation of New York Women's Philanthropy at its luncheon, "In Her Footsteps." To say it was one of my happiest and proudest moments as a parent is an understatement. Like most children, my daughter never saw herself becoming involved in places that I cared about. Though she respected what I did, she wanted to find her own niche. That she found her own way and made her own place in the same organization that afforded me so many opportunities is really very special. More importantly, she is being recognized for her own talents, leadership skills, and maturity—not as my daughter. In the process of making her own journey of discovery she is sitting on boards that fit her talents, and she looks forward to continuing to make a difference within the Jewish community and the world outside it. It is a pleasure to see our children find their areas of caring because they have seen what we have done as a parent and follow by example. It is not important for them to wear our shoes, but it is important for them to make their own footprints.

I am happy to see that my children are committing themselves and therefore their families to strong ties to the community and to Israel. Our children on the West Coast have introduced us to the Shoah Foundation and the need for education in Europe to combat anti-Semitism, while our children on the East Coast are embracing the merits of a Jewish day school education. All in all our three children and two children by marriage are intertwining and benefiting from one another.

I am deeply moved by what has been accomplished by the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) over the years in remote countries and towns in the far-off continent of Africa. The atrocities committed on innocent men, women, and children still leave our ears ringing with their cries of pain and the silence of those who were slaughtered in the name of power. Although there are no services rendered to Jews from their funds the AJWS has sounded the clarion call, time and again. Over the last two years I have been engaged with AJWS along with my daughter who is the liaison to our family foundation on the content of the grants proposed to us by AJWS. It is a profound feeling to know that though I live on the other side of the world, my philanthropy is helping a young girl to be educated instead of raped, to be fed instead of starving, to reach womanhood instead of dying young. The "Jewish" in AJWS alerts the world to remember "that we are a light unto the nations" and will continue to be so until genocide is erased from the vocabulary of humankind.

My latest volunteer opportunity is bringing the Harold Grinspoon PJ Library to my synagogue. The PJ stands for pajamas. What better time to read than at bedtime? I had already brought this program to Hoboken, New Jersey, and was so touched by the results and the differences that were made in the lives of so many families. Each month a book arrives with a story of Jewish content. It may describe a Jewish holiday or just be a fun story that depicts Jewish life around the world. The idea is to connect parents and children in an easy and comfortable

setting and to make Judaism fun and inviting. I look to the day when the PJ Library is accessible in all languages and communities where Jewish couples and intermarried couples reside.

Continuing to expand my horizons, at times I feel like an accordion. Three such organizations I find so interesting and where I also volunteer are Livnot, Shalva, and Paideia. Livnot renews the connection to Israel and Jewish life for post-college students who have fallen off the radar screen while Shalva gives joy to those youngsters who are physically and mentally challenged and their parents from birth until 18 years of age. The parents are given the respite that is needed to keep the family unit intact by having their children stay at Shalva for a weekend when needed and for two weeks of summer camp. Paideia invigorates and infuses young leaders from the communities of Eastern, Western, and Central Europe, Russia, the FSU, and Israel with more Jewish knowledge and cultural assets to become even more dynamic leaders through a year-long fellowship in Stockholm as Paideia Fellows. The best part of all this involvement was having the opportunity to meet so many wonderful kids and young adults.

Involvement in politics and AIPAC has been a journey of its own and afforded me the pleasure of meeting people I would never have thought to meet. What I have learned is that every one of us can make a difference if we choose to. Most of my volunteering and philanthropy have been outside of North America. I have had more fun and joy through these experiences in addition to all the learning that one garners. I have had untold satisfaction and gathered more memories than my memory bank can hold. I truly feel I am making a difference and feel blessed that I have been given these opportunities and the means to manage this.

Sometimes I am asked why my husband and I do not take more relaxing vacations together. To me, the volunteer life is what I find exciting. The many experiences I have had can never be replicated. The high I got after meeting a young Jewish leader in Romania, which barely has a Jewish community, and yet he is optimistic about the future, was indescribable. To be able to help him fund his dream of bringing Jews from the surrounding areas and then reading his e-mail about the exciting results of our combined efforts is better than any vacation.

It is said that the Jewish world is small and yet the world itself seems that way at times. The more people we meet, the more we find that the differences between us are not that wide. My foray within federation and then on to other organizations has given me a network of people and nonprofit organizations I would have never known about, least of all been involved with. It is almost as though my life is like a line of dominos that are tenderly hinged together, which when touched, perform the most beautiful and rhythmic sight.

To be a volunteer today is more than sitting on a committee. It can be a full-time job or a part-time job. It is an opportunity to change the world we live in. For me, volunteering has enriched my life in innumerable ways. I look forward to my next adventure and the challenges that lie ahead. I hope you will join me on my continuing journey.

D.W

***To be a volunteer today is more than sitting on a committee. It is an opportunity to change the world we live in.***

As you have just read, Diane's lifelong volunteer career in the Jewish non-profit community speaks volumes about one person's ability to contribute so much to the quality of the Jewish world today through a personal, hands-on commitment, as well as the chance for leadership and vision to shape its future.

At the same time, I believe that Diane has been lucky. Each of the organizations that she has been welcomed into was primed and ready to provide her with meaningful opportunities that tapped into her passions, strengths, and talents. Research shows that "committed, talented volunteers who are working in volunteer-friendly organizations have the potential to perform valuable and highly skilled work, donate money, and activate social networks that multiply the impact of their individual contributions" (Eisner et al., 2009).

May we each be fortunate enough to serve on a volunteer force filled with "Dianes," and may we each become volunteers in organizations that welcome and appreciate our skills and experience.

S.K.

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