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“Just” What?

Several months ago my husband and I were working on a rail to trail conversion in our neighborhood, digging out debris and planting trees. At one point I was separating the junk found in the digging process from the recyclable beer cans and glass bottles when someone walked up and started talking to me. With my head still down, in the midst of trying to subdue a long strand of barbed wire into a self-contained shape that would not spring out and hurt anyone, I began to answer the question of what I was doing when I realized that I recognized the voice. I looked up to see a smiling woman, covered in long sleeves, a hat, and sunglasses against the solar radiation the same as I was, and instantly recognized her. Happily identifying another common interest that I hadn't known about, I expressed my pleasure at seeing her before we each continued our work on site.

Later, after the group finished planting the last of 70 chokecherry trees along the recently cleared rail line in a single morning's work, we reconvened for an outdoor lunch from the grill of the local tennis club that backs up to the rail bed and whose owners are big supporters of the trail project. I saw Diane again, busily taking care of details so often overlooked in an informal large gathering. Impressed by how involved she was in smoothing the rough edges of the event, I asked if she were one of the organizers. “Oh no,” she replied, “I'm just a volunteer.”

“Just” a volunteer—it stunned me. We had “just” been part of a successful weekend-long effort to plant nearly 300 trees, a project undertaken by unpaid members of the community who came singly, in groups, and with their families. We had “just” saved our township thou-



sands of dollars by donating our time, and proved to several grant foundations that their funding was not sitting idly in a bank, but that the intended projects were being completed on time and within budget. “Just” a volunteer—yet Diane was an important part of the undertaking, and her particular contributions were often of the unseen but critical variety without which the entire process would have been less pleasant and more difficult. Her response, however, was not unique.

The word “just” can be used as a way to deflect attention, but it is also demeaning when used in other contexts. For those daring to call me “just” a surveyor, laser-controlled vehemence directed their way assures that such belittlement shall never be repeated. Earning a license required experience, education, and examination, and maintaining it requires equal attention and effort. Surely any professional in any field feels the same and would similarly set the ill-spoken insulter straight, hopefully broadening that person's perceptions in the process. But while a livelihood is readily defended as a worthwhile undertaking, too

often we undervalue the unpaid activities known as “volunteerism”.

Let's think for a moment about volunteer efforts that make a difference. While we are familiar with highly publicized groups such as Doctors Without Borders, Habitat for Humanity, and scores of others, many of us volunteer on a regular basis as part of the fabric of our lives. We coach after-school sports teams, we shovel the sidewalk of an elderly neighbor, we chaperone a class trip, we work behind the scenes in community projects sponsored by our places of worship. Whether we affect one life or many from the initial effort, the net gain is much larger. We bring smiles, we offer relief, we save lives. No thanks are asked for or expected. Part of being human is helping one another.

How many of us are or have been active in our chapter, state, or national surveying societies? That, too, represents volunteer effort, one that changes the very nature and quality of our profession. Without strong members in these organizations we would have little input to legislation affecting our practices,

we would have less public visibility as a profession distinct from engineering (although that is an ongoing educational process we must undertake for the public's benefit), and we would have fewer scholarship opportunities for those undertaking the study of our unique and vital field. So much of our professional activity has been molded by volunteer efforts, although it is only sometimes that we acknowledge appreciation for the people who have helped improve our daily work in this way.

If still not convinced that volunteerism matters, think for a moment about the fighters for a non-British United States, for civil rights, and for women's suffrage. Untold thousands of volunteers with strong beliefs that their efforts could improve their lives and the lives of their descendants transformed the shape of our country, even influenced the world.

The hours we invest in mentoring and building houses and raising scholarship funds and gathering medical supplies profoundly change lives. We mold future community leaders and citizens by accompanying a group of youngsters to a picnic or a performance, broadening horizons for some who might otherwise never have escaped the confines of the classroom or the four walls of their homes. We build community strength by working side by side with our neighbors in reviewing development plans, in petitioning for traffic lights at deadly intersections, in Neighborhood Watch meetings and patrols to protect our families and homes.

While the strains of a struggling economy and tight budgets take a toll on our energies and our outlook, there is still much that we accomplish without much or any financial outlay. Perhaps even more than in boom times, being a volunteer fulfills a desire to do more, to offer to others without thinking of any remuneration, to feel fully alive and human. When we are busy volunteering, our minds calm down to focus rather than jitter around the edges of the worries plaguing us. There is no "mere-ness" or lowliness associated with it, but when paying work picks up, sometimes we forget to make time to continue the pleasure of freely serving others.

The word "just" has another meaning, and that is in the context of fairness, honesty, and impartiality. If we can think about that definition when describing our often undervalued donated time and energy, perhaps longer descriptive phrases will come to us when explaining what we do and why. 