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## VOLUNTEERISM—AN EGO MASSAGER?

BY WALTER FRIESEN

*Mr. Friesen is the institutional coordinator of the California Youth Authority's Citizen's Initiative Project.*

**Mr. Friesen's article serves to introduce a comprehensive report by a volunteer, Marie Van Veldhuizen, on what it's like to work as a volunteer in a project which serves as a bridge between institution and parole.**

The Citizen's Initiative Parole Re-entry Project is a federally funded volunteer program designed to assist those of our wards who will be paroled from five Northern California institutions and two camps to the Sacramento or Hayward parole areas. The program involves a one-to-one match with a community volunteer who will assist and support the ward as he deals with re-entry problems. Involvement with the ward begins 30 to 60 days prior to his release from the institution and carries into the first four to six months of parole.

At the institution, CIP staff and/or volunteers conduct an intensive pre-release interview with all wards pending parole to the target areas. The objective is to find out as much as possible from the ward, his background, institutional adjustment, personality characteristics, self-image, problem areas, goals and anticipated needs on parole.

The interviewer consults with staff who have worked with the ward, then writes a summary or "profile" report, assessing all of the information gleaned from the interview, staff consultations, and review of the ward's case file. This report is sent to CIP parole coordinators in Sacramento or Hayward. These people then find a citizen-volunteer in that community who will work with the ward and attempt to help him achieve success in his re-entry in the community.

Ward involvement in the project is voluntary. Wards are assured their decision will have no effect on board decisions or release dates. Some believe it, some don't. Nevertheless, 95 percent of the 450 wards interviewed have indicated a desire to be matched with a community volunteer.

Judy Embree is the Project Director. I am the institutional coordinator, based at the Northern California Youth Center in Stockton. Dale Constable, Hayward, and Lou Rassmussen, Sacramento, are the parole coordinators.

Marie Van Veldhuizen, a volunteer, has been conducting pre-release interviews at the Stockton institutions for the past two years. A student at Delta College when she began, she is now a senior at Cal State University - Sacramento.

During the fall 1978 semester, Marie enrolled in the Individual Learning Program at the University. As her project, she chose to continue and expand her involvement with CIP. She wanted to evaluate the project in terms of its effectiveness in relation to the stated goals. How does the project impact on institution staff, volunteers, parole agents and wards? Is volunteerism a pie-in-the-sky venture which only massages the ego and salves the conscience of the volunteer, while he or she gets in the way of the client and staff? Or is there value

and benefit in finding people who can take a personal interest in a ward, and stand by to lend assistance and support wherever possible?

Though not a detailed statistical overview, Marie's report, which follows, presents hard-to-measure data: People and their gut level reaction to a volunteer program.

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Driving north on Highway 99 one night, one of my children asked, "What are all those lights over there for?" He was pointing to an area out in the country and it looked like a miniature city with flood lights illuminating the total area.

I remembered seeing a sign, Northern California Youth Center. I explained to my children that it was a place where kids were in jail, adding, "can you imagine being a kid and not going home at night, not being able to leave that place but always under the eye of a guard?"

We talked the rest of the way home about NCYC and I painted a grim picture of kids in jail. I was sure they were all thinking, "I'll never get into that kind of trouble."

Something happened to me as a result of that conversation. I was never able to drive past NCYC again without wondering what happens to young lives to bring them to that place.

Some time later, I received a call from Walt Friesen, volunteer coordinator at NCYC asking me to volunteer to do some public speaking for the Citizen's Initiative Project. This would involve going to service clubs, churches, schools, any group, and recruit community volunteers to provide direct and indirect services to Youth Authority wards and staff.

I had just completed a class in correctional counseling taught by a parole agent at college and by now my interest in the CYA had deepened. I agreed to volunteer.

Mr. Friesen asked me to attend a training session given at the NCYC at Stockton.

Driving into the institution grounds provided me with a close-up view of what I'd only seen from Highway 99 before. The institution is situated on 960 state-owned acres among fields of tomatoes, peppers and corn. The grounds are well-kept. You see large lawn areas and one gets the feeling of a quiet peaceful setting. No guards greet you and the buildings are better than many of our public high schools. My mental picture of a jail did not apply here.

After the training, Mr. Friesen took me to visit a dorm. Here are about 50 single beds lined up on two sides with an aisle in the middle. Next to each bed is a padlocked metal box containing the ward's possessions. Gang showers take up part of the area. In the middle of the dorm is a glassed-in security station where staff can observe all activities in the dorm and day room. Staff people do not wear guns, only a beeper that alerts security of trouble if it should occur.

While visiting the dorm that day the wards (they resent being called kids or inmates and are called wards or students) returned from their school for the noon break. Soon about 15 youths surrounded us with questions. "Why are you here?" "Have you come to counsel us?" "When can you come back?" I couldn't believe it—they were friendly, open young people eager to visit.

While speaking for community groups, I decided I needed more personal contact with the wards in order to be a more effective representative for the

Citizen's Initiative Project. By now I was a student at Sacramento State and through the Individualized Learning Program decided to work with CIP for my project. I consulted with staff, Walt Friesen, institution volunteer coordinator and Judy Embree, project administrator. It was decided the main thrust of my work would be to do pre-release interviews and evaluate the volunteer impact on wards.

### *Learning*

There is much to be learned in regard to interviewing skills. Mr. Friesen is a skilled interviewer. He knows what to say, when to speak, when to be silent and what to observe. He knows when to push further in certain directions, when to reassure the ward and when to stop.

Before doing any interviews on my own, I first observed Mr. Friesen. With a pre-release form to guide him, he made it seem rather easy. However, then came my turn to do the interview and he observed me. I found it was not easy! After his critique (a humbling experience) I was on my own.

There are three schools at NCYC.—O. H. Close, Karl Holton, and DeWitt Nelson. The wards at O. H. Close are youngest in both age and maturity. The emphasis is on classroom education. They live and study in separate groups of 50 on their living unit.

Karl Holton School concentrates on academic education, from courses in reading and math through high school and junior college degree programs. These wards are older and are in for very serious offenses.

The third school is DeWitt Nelson where older (17-23) wards are sent who seem better suited to vocational training than to book-learning.

The total population of the wards (all male) is about 1,100. It was from this population that I would be doing interviews at the three schools.

During my first interview, I remember feeling glad that I was not being observed by staff, and glad the ward did not know how green I was at this experience. Writing the summary was both time-consuming and difficult. However, I did enjoy doing the interviews. The procedure went like this: I would go to the Communications Center of the particular school the ward was in. I would write down my name, reason for my visit, whom I was going to see, the time of day and when I planned to check out. I was then given a beeper for security purposes. When the beeper is pressed, lights go on at the Communications Center and security men come running to help anyone that is having trouble with a ward.

When the ward arrived after being paged by the Communications Center from the school area, we were given a room to conduct the interview. I always left the door of the room open and was usually within the vision of a staff person.

At this point, the ward is undoubtedly asking himself all kinds of questions. Who is this lady? Why does she want to see me? Does she have anything to do with my Board Report?

I start telling the ward that I understand he is about to be paroled. Then I explain the Citizen's Initiative Project. The ward quite often asks questions before he makes a decision about becoming involved with a volunteer. Some express mild interest by saying, "well maybe it could be helpful—I sure need a job." Some are very interested and some refuse the service altogether.

### *Interviewing*

The first step in the interview process is to put the ward at ease. Rapport is important and while the interviewer should be friendly, showing a sincere interest in the ward and his problems, the interviewer should not over-react in this regard. He should not go out of his way to promise the ward more help than is either feasible or possible.

By listening to what the ward has to say, what he does not say, and by observing his behavior, and being sensitive to implied feelings of the ward, the interviewer can be instrumental in clarifying the ward's needs and the issues involved.

I feel the pre-release interview can be a therapeutic experience for the ward. A volunteer gives the ward an opportunity to tell his story to a person who is not there to judge him. The volunteer doesn't have the keys to the place and what the ward says doesn't have anything to do with his Board Report. This frees him to talk, and it always surprises me how much they do talk.

One ward during an interview broke down crying because he had raped a 14-year-old girl. He said "The bible says you have to make restitution, and how can I do that?" The interviewer must know how to get him back together and not leave him in the unsettling state.

### *Conclusions*

Sometimes when you hear from the wards the difficulties they have encountered in their lives, the rejection from parents, the physical abuse, the series of foster homes, you wonder why they are not even more hostile. So you meet them and they do not dare to trust. They don't really believe you when you say you want to be their friend.

But there is a certain magic that happens when you become involved on a one-to-one relationship. They listen, they observe, and maybe you are just a small part of a changing process that can happen to a ward.

Lou Rasmussen told me about a ward released to Sacramento who recently came into the parole agent's office proudly showing his high school graduation picture. Lou recalled how the youth had been placed in a group home because his family didn't want him. He was matched to a volunteer. It was through the encouragement and support of the volunteer that the youth decided to return to school and with that same support continued school. He was now graduating.

How can you evaluate intangibles such as respect, caring, acceptance, encouragement, and support?

Whether it's institution staff, parole agent or volunteer—If we can look for the positive things in a ward's life, treat him with human dignity—give him a dream to build his self esteem—be a person he can trust, only then do we have a basis upon which to build a helping relationship.

**END**