



## IN PRAISE OF AMERICA'S SERVICE GROUPS

By Michael C. Maibach - Alexandria Times, Alexandria, Virginia - July 27, 2006

Alistair Cooke said, "America is the place where ordinary people do extraordinary things" - and it's true. Among the most remarkable achievements of the American people is their volunteerism, their tireless community service across this nation. While rarely on the front page or the nightly news, we read and hear about civic action in the quiet tones we've come to take for granted: "Lions Clubs Raise \$150 Million To Combat Blindness", "Northern Virginia Junior League Supports Homeless Shelter", "B'nai B'rith Helps Hurricane Katrina Victims", "Sertoma Gives \$20 Million To Combat Speech, Hearing and Language Disorders" ... and so much more.

At a time of rising work demands - when TVs and PCs keep us informed of and yet detached from the needs of others - our civic groups endure, even if less appreciated than in the past. We ought to recognize anew their contributions, support them financially, and consider joining. It will improve your life, while you are improving the life of someone else.

In the larger sense, we rarely ponder the more fundamental contributions service groups make to the American commonweal. Having just celebrated the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, it's timely to examine what the Masons, Eagles, Salvation Army, Scouts, YMCAs, Knights of Columbus, Jaycees, Rotarians, Optimists... and Shriners add each day to this country's success story.

**They foster friendship, family unity and community spirit.** Civic and religious groups bring together members and their families for constructive, enjoyable activities – a Lions corn boil, a Shriners parade, a Jaycee Junior Olympics. They bring together people who might otherwise never meet and unite them in common cause. Civic groups honor outstanding community service, and thereby inspire others, especially the young.

**They expand people's horizons and teach tolerance.** Benjamin Disraeli said, "Travel teaches tolerance." Meeting people from other walks of life with backgrounds and problems you don't have is a form of 'social travel'. It opens people's minds and hearts to new ideas, and to what's really important. Rotary Clubs sponsor study trips abroad for young people who might never have the opportunity to leave our shores and experience other cultures. Such programs foster peace - person-by-person.

**They mold and connect civic-minded individuals across the globe.** Civic groups stand for high ideals and tangible social goals. The Jaycees are "a force for good in America and around the world." Almost a million and a half Lions in 197 nations have a single motto: "We Serve". Kiwanis pledge to "Serve the Children of the World". Its 600,000 members do so in 96 countries. Such goals take

attention away from one's own problems and focuses on the lot of others. When the Lions sell candy for the blind and the Knights of Columbus collect clothing for an African mission, members learn the precious lesson of giving. Group meetings feature guest speakers who offer a form of "continuing civic education" as they address important issues of the day.

**They develop character and leadership skills.** Whether the group is the Exchange Club, the Scouts, Junior League or the bar association, their programs require responsible group action and individual leadership. People learn to work with each other absent rank or advantage, meet challenges, and innovate for success.

**They serve the needs of fellow human beings.** A storm damages a community and the Red Cross is there to help. A fire guts a family's home and the Junior League gathers clothing overnight, while Habitat for Humanity helps build a new one. A personal tragedy visits a family and local volunteers - that family's 'extra' members - are there when needed.

**They allow people to make a difference.** As society grows more complex and urban, as government grows more bureaucratic, as the Internet creates "virtual communities" that don't compare with real ones, people may feel less able to make a difference in the lives of others. Service groups offer an opportunity for people to make a difference in tangible ways. Giving helps the giver, as much as those who are served.

**And they keep our taxes low, our government limited, and our freedoms alive.** We are a nation of groups. Will Rogers once quipped, "Any time more than two Americans gather, one of them is sure to begin looking for a gavel to call the meeting to order." By doing all the things private organizations do, by performing their quiet services so well, they chip away at growing demands for government services. When Shriners Children's Hospitals serve 800,000 children, government doesn't have to. When the Kiwanis combat iodine deficiency worldwide, millions of people avoid mental retardation and a lifetime of dependency and health care costs.

Most importantly, the services civic groups perform are not given in the form of a welfare check dropped in a metal mailbox. Rather, they are people serving people, neighbor serving neighbor, family serving family.... When people freely dedicate themselves to such work, when they take ownership of the community of which they are a part, they practice a form of "freedom" that is not about "me", but about "we" - as in "We the People". Consider what this might do for you.

*(c) Michael C. Maibach has lived in Old Town Alexandria since 1997. Current and past community service includes engagement in the Boy Scouts, Big Brothers, Jaycees, Junior Achievement, Project Business, Habitat for Humanity, World Affairs Councils, the Churchill Club, his church Vestry, teaching Sunday School, founding the Alexandria Republican Roundtable and the Center For the Electoral College, volunteering on political campaigns, running for public office twice, one of which involved being elected at the age of 20.*