

THE PEORIA OBSERVER

OUR SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS: THEY ARE TO BE APPRECIATED

By Michael C. Maibach

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Alistair Cooke said, “America is the place where ordinary people do extraordinary things,” and it is true. Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of the American people is their perpetuation of freedom in a world of despotism and civil strife.

One hundred and thirty years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville examined the foundations of our liberty in his classic *Democracy in America*. He saw liberty’s two principle adversaries as “individualism” (an idea born with modern-day democracy in the 18th century), and the “tyranny of the majority” (feared as well by our Founding Fathers).

By “Individualism” he meant crass selfishness, a lack of concern for others and the commonwealth. “Me-ism.” With the advent of television, unprecedented mobility, the decline of family life and material prosperity generally, individualism has passed its healthy stage. America’s social fabric threatens to rip apart.

By “Tyranny of the majority” de Tocqueville meant an absence of empathy... of consideration for the other guy. Only the courts, acting on the Bill of Rights, and men of good will foster regard for the rights of the minority, whatever its form. But, today untempered majoritarianism may be on the upswing as representative forums are increasingly side stepped by popular initiatives and referendums.

Standing up to this two-headed enemy of liberty, de Tocqueville saw the moral fiber, the character of Americans. “I consider mores to be one of the great general causes responsible for the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States”.

Other than the family, what shapes and sustains this inner strength? The answer, in part, must be civic and religious groups – voluntary associations.

We read headlines about such groups each day: “Ambucs Auction to Aid Handicapped,” “Church Group Aids Flood Victims,” Policeman of Year Named by Ad Club,”... “Bradley Fraternity Holds Charity Marathon.” There have always been private, local civic and religious groups who quietly go about their good work. And when you and I learn of their efforts, we naturally applaud them.

Yet, it’s probably fair to say that we rarely ponder the deeper and most lasting contribution such groups of individuals render to their communities and, thus, of our nation. Even the members of such organizations probably don’t conceive the significance their efforts hold.

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Because of the special challenges to our freedom today, it is fitting to examine the essence of the gift that the Mason and Eagles, Salvation Armies, Scouts, YMCs, Jaycees, Altrusians, Rotarians and Shriners give each day to this country's success story. Here's what they offer.

They foster friendship, family unity and community spirit. Civic and religious groups bring together members and their families for constructive and enjoyable activities, a Farm Bureau corn boil, a Community Thanksgiving luncheon, a Jaycee Junior Olympics. They bring together people (often newcomers to a community) who might otherwise spend that time alone and they acknowledge and honor the outstanding achievements of their neighbors: DAR "Good Citizenship" Award, B'nai B'rith "Man of the Year," Sertoma "Service to Mankind" Award. Such recognition encourages others to achieve and inspires young people who today see, to have a dearth of idols.

They expand people's horizons and teach tolerance. Benjamin Disraeli said that "travel teaches tolerance." Meeting people from other walks of life is a form of social travel and surely opens people to new ideas and world views. Rotary clubs, for instance, sponsor study and travel abroad for young people who otherwise might never have the opportunity to leave our shores.

They mold civic-minded individuals. Almost all community organizations have high ideals and tangible social goals. Involvement in these goals takes attention away from one's own problems and career and focuses attention on the lot of others. When Lions sell candy for the blind and a local church group collects food and clothing for an American mission, members learn the precious lesson of giving. Moreover, members gain a better perspective of their local governments and the potential of their community by listening to presentations of guest speakers.

They develop character. Whether the group is the Exchange Club, the Scouts, Junior League, or the bar association, they adopt programs that require responsible group action and individual leadership. People learn to work with each other; how to fail as well as succeed.

They serve the needs of fellow human beings. A tornado hits, Red Cross and Sheriff's Auxiliary volunteers are there. A fire guts a family's home and a Catholic women's organization begins sewing new clothes...while the 4-H Club builds them a new home. A personal tragedy visits a family and fellow group members become that family's "extra" members if needed.

They allow people to make a difference. As society grows more complex and urban, as our government grows bigger, and as neighborhoods dissolve, people too often feel powerless to shape their environment. Yet through positive group action, people can and do make a dent, a difference in a real and seeable way. And that's important; especially during this time of widespread alienation and cynicism.

And they keep our taxes low, our government limited, and our freedom intact. Yes, we're a nation of associations. As Will Rogers once quipped: "Any time more than two Americans meet, 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. Private schools not only provide a real choice

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in the education of our children, they also ease the tax burden of homeowners. When the Shriners build a children's hospital, government doesn't have to.

And, most importantly, the services these associations perform are not given in the form of welfare check, nor given by a large government bureaucracy. Rather, it's a case of people serving people, neighbor serving neighbor, family helping family. And not because it is the law...not because they have to.

© Michael C. Maibach, 28, is a native of Peoria. Today he's a member of Caterpillar Tractor Co.'s Government Public Affairs Department. Several examples found in this essay represent recent activities of Peoria civic groups.