

## Volunteerism for Teenagers: A Great Character Builder

By Aldene Fredenburg Volunteerism among high school and college students is at an all-time high; many school systems actually build volunteer work into their curriculum. Young people are building homes for Habitat for Humanity, working in National Parks for the Conservation Corps, and involving themselves in political, environmental, and social causes. It's certainly admirable for young people to take an active part in these causes; but it may be even more important than routinely recognized. Unfortunately, the United States is a materialistic society. Teenagers - many of them the same teenagers lining up to volunteer their time - have access to more discretionary funds than any previous generation, and they're spending it. CDs, DVDs, iPods, cell phones (and the accompanying bills), designer clothes, shoes, and bags - all of these material goods are in easy reach of many of our teenagers. Beyond the danger that these kids will grow up with unrealistic expectations when it comes time for them to move out, get a job, and support themselves, there's a real question as to whether these young folks, used to having anything and everything they want, will be able to relate to those less fortunate than they are.

This is not a frivolous issue. The high school and college students of today are the voting citizens of tomorrow; some of them will become the leaders of tomorrow, charged with making decisions about people from all walks of life, from the most privileged among us to the desperately poor. How are these often privileged middle class kids to develop empathy for those less fortunate than they are, if they never interact with them? Volunteerism is a way for kids to cut across social and financial boundaries and connect with people different from them. Upper middle class kids from the suburbs of Malibu can work side by side with poor kids from rural West Virginia and urban Brooklyn, clearing trails in a national forest and in the process experiencing an environment beyond the screaming product ads on TV and in magazines billboards. Young people who sign on with Habitat for Humanity can develop an understanding of the difficulties involved for a low-income family when faced with finding decent affordable housing. Locally, kids who volunteer as companions in nursing homes can get a sense of the loneliness and isolation many elderly people experience when cut off from family and friends. Teenagers who involve themselves in volunteer work can develop valuable skills and a sense of responsibility that will stand them in good stead when it comes time for them to enter the work world. But perhaps more important than job-related skills is the opportunity for these young people to develop empathy and a sense of compassion for those who have been wounded by life. Perhaps for these future leaders and citizens, developing compassion is the paramount and most essential benefit of the volunteer experience.

### About the Author

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