



Monday, Sep 29, 2008

Posted on Thu, Sep. 18, 2008

On the Job with Terri Parodi of Hands on the Valley**BY ANDREA V. HERNANDEZ - ahernandez@ledger-enquirer.com**

For busy people, doing volunteer work may be desirable, but almost impossible to fit in their schedule -- or so they think.

Terri Parodi sees room for negotiation. Parodi is director of Hands on the Valley, the volunteer center of the United Way of the Chattahoochee Valley. The center hooks people up with flexible volunteer opportunities -- whether it is a one-day project or a weekly commitment.

This week, Parodi and her team are preparing for Hands on Georgia Week, an initiative in which volunteers across the state take on multiple projects. It runs from Saturday to Oct. 5.

Parodi sat down with the Ledger-Enquirer to talk about community service for busy people, corporate volunteerism and Hands on Georgia Week.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Tell me about Hands on the Valley.

We are a volunteer center and our focus is to promote and expand volunteerism. We were Hands on Columbus. When we merged with United Way, we decided to change our name to Hands on the Valley with the idea that we could then go beyond Columbus and Muscogee County... Especially within the next year, we want to reach into Harris County and Chattahoochee County. Those counties are growing at a very rapid rate and we feel like there are many opportunities to partner with nonprofits that are in need of volunteers.

That's what we do. We create and manage a few projects on our own. Hands on Georgia Week was established five years ago and we've always led that effort. But everything we do, we're always partnering with a nonprofit.

We are a web-based system. People can go on and search the Web site and find flexible opportunities for service. There are lots of volunteer opportunities that require long-term commitment, additional orientation or background checks. But most of what we do are things that are short-term -- what we call episodic volunteering.

People's lives are so mobile. People are so busy. I think in their heart they say, "Gee, I really want to help." But they look at their schedule and say "When am I going to have the time to do this?" What we're trying to say is it's OK. You give a few hours and you can make a difference.

I was going to ask you about that. If you had to pitch someone who's pretty busy, what would you say to get them involved?

We say, "Your heart says yes, your schedule says ahhhhh." We see room for negotiation. That's what we try to do. We offer several 30 minute orientations for Hands On. Generally they're at the Columbus Public Library several times a month. If you have three or more people interested, whether its a church or corporation, we'll come to you... .

The orientation is to tell them how the program works and also to talk to people about what kind of time they have and what they're really interested in. Are you interested in homeless animals? Do you want to work with kids? Do you want to work with seniors? Are you a handyman and want to work with Habitat for Humanity? We try to lead them in those directions where we think they'd have an interest... .

Our government and our social agencies can't handle all of the needs in our community. That's why volunteers are so important.

Some businesses across the country -- including in our local area -- have been allowing employees to take time out of their work schedule to volunteer. What do you think this says about corporate culture nowadays?

I think it's a good thing. From the corporate perspective, it's another way that they can increase their philanthropy back to their community. A lot of companies say "We support United Way. We support several nonprofit organizations through financial support, or our employees come together to give." But when you can give of time and treasure, I think it says a lot about the company as a good corporate citizen. It helps them expand their philanthropy.

For the employee, what a morale booster that your company would allow you that opportunity to take time away from work to do good in your community -- and they recognize that.

We have another component of Hands on the Valley called the corporate volunteer program. This is where I work with companies or departments who want to get together and do something as a group. They contact me and we find out their interests. Is there a certain population you want to have an impact on? I will act as the liaison. I will find a project that fits their needs.

I researched and found the percentage of Americans who volunteer has gone down in recent years. (In 2007, the rate was 26.2 percent, compared to 26.7 percent in 2006 and 28.8 percent in 2005.) Why do you think that is?

I think volunteerism really shot up after 9/11. I think people really wanted to help because there was a crisis, a critical situation. Therefore, we've actually had a jump and since then, it's kind of leveled off. It may be what it was prior to 9/11... .

People are volunteering all the time and they may not even think of it as volunteering. They may volunteer through their church, children's school, PTA. All of those are volunteer opportunities in giving back to the community but people may not see it as that... . A lot of people say "Yeah, I do that, but maybe I'd like to do a little something else." The main thing we say is it's not important how many times you volunteer. Maybe you can only get involved in Hands on Georgia week and you work a couple of hours one time a year. That's OK. You've taken a step.

As an organization, what do you need to do to get more people to volunteer? What about getting more businesses to support employees who volunteer?

I think it's education and marketing. A lot of times people don't know we exist. And we're trying to do a better job of letting people know there is a volunteer center. And that's what we're here to do -- help people find those opportunities... .

(As for businesses,) I think part of the United Way campaign, which we're in the midst of, this year we're trying to give them information about Hands on the Valley. Campaign coordinators within the company -- we let them know that we do have a volunteer center and we'll give them information.

I just went out while they were doing a presentation on United Way at Kohl's. I told folks we had a volunteer center and Kohl's is very big on supporting those organizations that support children. I talked to them and sent them some information that they could share with their employees.

Because United Way does have many doors open to them in the corporate world through the United Way campaign, we can share that information about volunteerism.

