

Carol Lawson-Swezey: The pay isn't great, but volunteering's pay-off is

By Carol Lawson-Swezey

Time: one of our most precious resources.

It can't be bought or recycled or banked to be disbursed at a later date. Those treasured moments, precious hours and spent days can never be recovered again. All the more reason to spend them wisely now.

Time is both priceless and expendable. We can choose to consume it by watching weekend marathons of "Mad Men" or share it with others. In the course of my alternate egos of working with volunteers and writing free-lance stories, I have met many who give of their time and resources liberally and without hesitation.

I have always loved volunteers. Ever since I was a young preschooler and the crossing guard protectively held my hand as I hesitantly made my way to a new school, I have felt embraced by that gift of time.

In the many years of working at a hospital, I have seen volunteers lightening the burden of nurses, comforting families and even holding the hands of patients in their final hours, bridging that hazy darkness between life and death. At church, volunteers teach Sunday and Vacation Bible School, deliver meals, run committees, tend the garden and lovingly create quilts and crane wreaths to dissipate loneliness and fear.

We all have the same 24 hours each day. Whether it's the busy physician couple with three young sons who maintain hectic careers, sports schedules and parenting commitments but still scrape together the time to head committees and steer fundraisers. Or the retired Nisei minister and his wife who tirelessly work to educate about the World War II Japanese-American internment camps to prevent that travesty from happening again.

I am moved to tears during Valley Children Hospital's Kids Day when the landscape becomes a profusion of volunteers, both young and old, who brave the predawn cold to sell papers to benefit sick children. I am buoyed against the inequities of life when I join others in packing and distributing food, marching for dimes or just simply reading to kids in my children's classrooms.

When I lost my life-long job in a position which I cherished, I floundered aimlessly for awhile. Then I realized I might not have a job, but I was given this gift of time to spend wisely or foolishly. I filled my days with volunteer work. The pay wasn't great but the payoff was. I felt again that my life had purpose and focus.

Volunteers embrace and sculpt the world with their generosity. Whether it is a passion to battle hunger or abuse or human trafficking, the hours they commit, the years they devote and the eagerly donated minutes they offer are incalculable in their worth. The world, nor I, could not survive without those who give of their time and gifts each and every day. There is not enough money nor gratitude for what they do.

Many years ago, after a difficult and nearly fatal delivery, I remember lying next to my sleeping infant, our breathing synchronized. I realized then, as I do now, that that's what life is all about. We breathe life into and out of each other. In giving, we receive. In receiving, we give.

I have once again been blessed to work with volunteers. They are the best bosses in the world. All they require is some direction and a healthy dose of gratitude. There is no better high than to serve those who serve others. I go to work every day knowing that collectively, with this little light of ours, we are capable of dispelling darkness and illuminating what is good and humane and right with our world.

Working with hospice volunteers makes me acutely aware of how precious life is. That what I have been given these past 19 years since the birth of my son is a second chance. These volunteers, whether they fold clothes at the thrift stores which support the hospice or hold vigils for dying patients, each is vital.

Those who give of their time spend lavishly with the same minutes we all have. But every one of them would say that they get back more than they give. They feel useful and necessary, and it gives them a reason to set one foot in front of another on this amazing yet jagged path we call life.

And in doing so, we indeed breathe life into and out of each other and together synchronize our cherished breaths.

Carol Lawson-Swezey is a resident of Fresno. Comment by going to [fresnobee.com/opinion](https://www.fresnobee.com/opinion) and clicking on Valley Voices.