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Transform yourself and the world - volunteer

Sabrina Qutb

Wednesday, January 14, 2009



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In 1994, Coretta Scott King asked Congress to make the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday an official national day of humanitarian service. Since then, thousands of Americans have made MLK Day a "day on" rather than a "day off," serving in homeless shelters, community centers, parks and schools. This year, the call to service on MLK Day is receiving a tremendous amount of attention because of the excitement around Barack Obama's inauguration and his personal endorsement of service on the holiday and throughout the year.

This national attention couldn't come at a more important time.

Economic upheaval has left local governments and nonprofits struggling to meet the needs of the growing number of poor and unemployed. As a country we are at crossroads. What will "change" look like?

In the Bay Area, most people encounter need in their community on a daily basis: an elderly person who could use a helping hand, a homeless person struggling with addiction, or a young person who needs a safe place to go after school. Unfortunately, we also face powerful forces in our culture that create obstacles to reacting to the needs we see around us. Economic pressure and cultural barriers tell us to value competition over cooperation, independence over interdependence and personal achievement over community well-being.

My organization believes that service has the power to pull people out of isolation and transform their lives. Multiplied across thousands of people in a region or even millions of people across the country, service has the power to transform our nation.

Susan Bremond was searching for new meaning after 23 years in the corporate world. She didn't know where to begin. She began volunteering at a variety of service projects. She eventually found herself at a project where HOBA volunteers served as conversation partners for English learners at an adult English-as-a-second-language class. At this project, something changed for Bremond, or as she puts it, "I felt my world expand." The project sparked the memory of her years in college when she had studied teaching and reignited her passion for it. Susan is now a full-time ESL teacher and regularly hosts groups of volunteers in her classroom.

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For HandsOn Bay Area volunteer Shubda Garani, community service gave her new confidence in her own power to influence the world around her. A full-time mom and a former telecommunications engineer and manager, Garani wanted to use her skills to help her community. She knew she had something to give, but lacked nonprofit experience. Through HOBA's Leadership Institute Fellowship Team, Garani gained real-world community organizing experience. Through direct service, she saw her actions result in concrete change. With this new sense of empowerment, Shubda is literally beginning to change the world. She is now helping to launch the first HandsOn affiliate in India.

By promoting and participating in service on MLK Day, our president-elect is challenging us to ask important questions. What is my responsibility to others? What role do I play in the way my community works? What issues do I care about most? How is my life aligned with what I value most?

If you care about the world your children will inherit, participate.

If you're busy on Jan. 19th, commit to serving on another day soon.

The Bay Area needs your service, and your hands-on direct service experience just might change your life. If enough of us step forward, we just might change the world.

Sabrina Qutb is the development director for HandsOn Bay Area, a nonprofit organization that creates opportunities for people to volunteer, learn and lead.

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