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## **High on giving People of all ages find joy in helping**

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Robyn Kennerknecht and Bob Oliver have discovered the joy that comes with helping others.

For Robyn, 9, it involves slicing pieces of cake and pastries onto plates for Sunday lunch at the Erie City Mission.

For Oliver, 61, it's walking beside or leading a horse that carries a rider with special needs.

The two embrace the opportunity they have to volunteer.

And millions more take the time to work in their communities, religious organizations, schools and civic groups.

Volunteerism is at a historic high compared to "rates we had 15 years ago or even 30 years ago," said Robert Grimm, director of research and policy development at the Corporation for National and Community Service.

The Washington, D.C.,-based corporation researches volunteer activities of Americans -- using information from the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics -- and promotes civic engagement through service and volunteering.

In 2006, 61.2 million Americans volunteered. That number was down slightly from 2005, when 65.4 million volunteers gave 8.2 billion hours of service, Grimm said.

Research also has shown that three groups are boosting the volunteer numbers: teens ages 16 to 19; baby boomers and others between the ages of 45 to 65; and senior citizens 65 and older.

Why do these groups stand out? For teens, Grimm said, it can be attributed to the growth in service-learning programs in schools, where a volunteer experience is connected to what students learn in the classroom.

And kids can also prompt parents to volunteer once parents become aware of opportunities at a school or with extracurricular activities.

As for older Americans, Grimm said, some of the reasons they boost volunteer rates is because people are living longer, are better-educated and want to benefit their community in some way.

No matter the age, people who serve others make a difference.

"Volunteers are what make communities work," Grimm said.

Without them, there wouldn't be tutors or mentors, meals delivered to the elderly or parents working in parent-teacher associations. "Volunteering allows you to see tangible benefits," Grimm said.

Oliver, of Erie, chose to volunteer after he retired from Erie Insurance.

"I wanted to do something that would be of help to others," he said.

He discovered that the Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center needed volunteers, and although he had been around horses only a few times, decided to give it a try.

The center provides horseback-riding lessons to children and adults with mental, physical or emotional problems.

Oliver has volunteered there since April, and is impressed with the program, employees and participants. "I just can't say enough good about it."

Robyn volunteers with her family at the City Mission. On Sunday, she sorted through the desserts to find treats that she thought others would enjoy and "what's easy for me to cut."

She surveyed the room as people lined up to grab a meal.

"There are a lot of nice people here who just want to get some food," she said.

Other volunteers say working in the community has opened their eyes to the needs around them and prompted them to help out.

### **Service with a smile**

Lauren Keller, MacKenzie Cherban and Jessica Czerwinski walked a short trek across the street to Friendship Towers.

The teens carried to-go meals from the City Mission to the tower residents. Once there, they delivered smiles with the food. They handed out boxes as residents' names were called and took the elevator to deliver food to other tenants.

The students volunteer at the mission through the St. Lawrence Youth Outreach Ministry.

Keller, 17, said she looks forward to smiles she gets from people while she works at the mission.

Czerwinski, 17, said volunteering has shown her "how much we take for granted." Volunteering also has allowed her to see the immediate difference a person can make in another's life.

Cherban, 18, wants to continue to find ways to serve others. No matter what she does in life, she said, "I want to help people."

The teens handed out their last box of food and headed back to the mission.

They slipped their hands into gloves before they placed hot dogs into buns. Minutes later, they lined up to serve the crowd who gathered for lunch.

### **Food and fun**

Lalida Raj neatly arranged juice and pretzels on tables for the students at the Inner-City Neighborhood Art House.

But Raj, 56, didn't get to watch as all of the children gobbled up the goodies. She had to head to her tutoring session.

She has volunteered at the Art House since 1996. Once her own children got older, it was a good time to get involved, she said.

Raj volunteers twice a week, and her jobs at the center include the snack preparation. She chooses healthy treats for the kids, such as apples and cheese and crackers.

She then helps feed their minds.

Raj tutors students in grades two through eight. "Along with the kids, I also learn," she said.

Her work at the Art House is meaningful.

"I have some satisfaction that I'm helping the kids," she said.

Another joy is watching the students grow and hearing their dreams for success, she said.

On this day, Raj tutored Jeremiah Richardson, 12, in math and worked with him on spelling words.

They finished their session, and Jeremiah zipped up his bulky backpack.

"She's nice," he said about Raj. "She tries to help everyone."

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### **Schools train new generation of generosity**

Local students have the opportunity to help others through the learn-and-serve program in the Erie School District.

The program engages students and district employees in community projects and volunteerism, said Judy Husted, its facilitator.

This school year, about 400 students in four high schools, middle schools and several of the elementary schools are involved in the program, Husted said.

Students in the program have cleaned up at Presque Isle State Park, collected clothing donations, mentored others and gathered items to send to soldiers overseas.

At the high schools, students also can earn credit for their community service, and scholarship money is available for students who volunteer in their community, Husted said.

Pam Wiley, a program adviser, said credits through community service can also be beneficial when students apply to colleges.

Wiley and Husted say the program helps students learn the importance of giving of themselves and helping their city.

Husted said the goal is for students to become "stakeholders in their community and that they will continue that practice throughout their life."

-- Sharla Bardin