

Anatomy of a volunteer

Amid 10,000 people serving as volunteers for one Catholic organization, there are bound to be common traits. Yet they won't be found in appearance, age, marital status or gender.

Instead, the inner workings of humans is where the anatomy of a volunteer forms. Openness, giving back, acceptance of differences, wanting to contribute - these characteristics are what Dennis Murphy consistently recognizes in volunteers as program manager of volunteer outreach with Catholic Charities' Our Daily Bread Employment Center, Baltimore.

"The most important criteria is the willingness to serve," said Mr. Murphy who manages 300 regular volunteers yet witnesses 10,000 total pass through Our Daily Bread annually from various organizations, schools, churches of all denominations and businesses.

"Most know their life is pretty good and want to give back," he said, "and feel this is a good way to do it. They are open to the experience. They meet people here they wouldn't encounter in their everyday lives."

Typically, he observes a 50/50 male and female split among the regular unpaid helpers; about 40 couples volunteer together. Since the primary time to serve clients at Our Daily Bread is mid-day, Mr. Murphy notices most volunteers are 60 plus and retired.

On weekends though, it's different. "They tend to be younger," he said, as many colleges and church groups assist. It can be tricky then to label the composition of an average volunteer.

For Corj Simmons, it's a bit easier to categorize. As manager of retail at Good Samaritan Hospital, Baltimore, she shuffles around 50 volunteers seven days a week between the coffee bar, and gift and thrift shops.

On weekends, hospital volunteers look a bit different than the weekenders encountered at Our Daily Bread; typically widows or those without families are the

ones willing to work, said Mrs. Simmons.

Backgrounds and careers aren't similar either; instead quite varied, she said. There are also more females. "They (women) tend to be a little more social, a little more confident in an unknown setting."

She describes a good volunteer as someone who is willing to learn, open minded, adapts to change, is nurturing, and who can laugh at herself and life.

"A good volunteer is the one who is here to serve in whatever capacity," said the nine-year veteran of the hospital. "They just want to be helpful and needed."

But it's not a perfect world, she half-joked. "When the weather is bad, you're going to do it yourself. Volunteers don't drive in bad weather!"