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## It's Time to Convert the – in Your Life to !

Maritza Martinez  
*University of Central Florida*

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## It's Time to Convert the – in Your Life to !

By Maritza Martinez  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, January 15, 2014

The beginning of a new calendar year is always a good time to reflect on the previous 12 months and set some goals for the future.

During this time of the year I am often reminded of the poem “The Dash” by Linda Ellis. The poem refers to the dates on a person’s tombstone, the birth year and year of death, separated by a *dash*. The poem makes the point that the dash represents what you did with your life from the time you were born until your death.

Were you a loving parent? An accomplished researcher? Community volunteer? Respectful child? Maybe you were the person who thought right before passing: “I hope I activated my autoreply.” Or maybe you were the person who during that last minute thought, “Wow. I lived my life intentionally and I invested my time wisely.”

I propose that instead of a dash, this year and every year after we substitute the dash with an exclamation point to symbolize a life lived purposely and intentionally, with excitement and gusto!

How should we achieve this goal? Perhaps by focusing on a short list of activities or things that we may want to try, and setting a time period to complete them to make sure we hold ourselves accountable. Or perhaps make spending time with family and friends a higher priority?

What about setting boundaries between ourselves and our technological habits, such as our cell phones? That way, when we are in a meeting, catching up with a friend at a café, or having dinner with our family, we can really be in the moment, instead of missing the

interaction because we are consumed by “capturing” the moment on camera so that we can enjoy it – later.

After all, it’s not about the destination, but the journey – the everyday; the little things that in retrospect will become the big things, or the fond memories we will retreat to during challenging times.

Or what about making it a goal this year to do something great, something we can all do: volunteer. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace.”

Volunteering or serving to improve one’s community is something we can all do. For some reason, people make volunteering seem like too much of a burden. They become overwhelmed by the thought of becoming involved, because they say they don’t have time, don’t know where to begin, or don’t consider themselves equipped with a skill unique enough to be appreciated or in demand. However, there are many ways in which you can exercise good citizenship and involvement that will probably lead to a happier, more exclamation-centric life – over the simple dash.

I invite you to explore mentoring a student or a younger professional, serving on a committee at your local YMCA or chamber of commerce, or reaching out to one of the many nonprofits in your area. Whether you are passionate about the arts, the wellbeing of animals, making connections on behalf of the local Boys & Girls Clubs, or lending your expertise through a community advisory board, there’s an organization or an individual you can positively impact, with little or no financial outlay required.

And the best part is that, more times than not, you will derive just as many benefits than the entity or organization by way of receiving personal fulfillment and a greater sense of community.

So this year, join the exclamation point movement and make it your best year yet!

*Maritza Martinez is director of the University of Central Florida’s Community Relations department. She can be reached at [Maritza.Martinez@ucf.edu](mailto:Maritza.Martinez@ucf.edu).*