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Who, Me? A Philanthropist?

By **Brenda S. Thompson**
UCF Forum columnist
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We must challenge the way people think about giving back to communities.



Students working in the community garden at the UCF Arboretum.

I recently attended two fundraising events that were truly amazing in terms of the generosity of the attendees. These individuals were able to pay hundreds of dollars for tickets to attend the events; in addition, they gave thousands more during the events to support the mission of the sponsoring organizations.

The donors' actions certainly depicted a philanthropic spirit in the traditional sense of the word, and I am sure their donations changed lives and will chart new courses that will transform individuals, communities and advance society enormously.

Philanthropy means "love of mankind." It typically involves an action aimed at improving a situation or condition by way of financial support. Today, however, a different concept of philanthropy expands the traditional view to include donations of time, talent and treasure in support of others.

Consistent with this notion, I have observed students beautifying communities by picking up litter on Saturday mornings, families donating time by working in food banks packaging meals for the hungry, neighbors providing outreach visitation to seniors in their homes and nursing homes, and still others volunteering in animal shelters and more.

Shouldn't these acts be considered philanthropic, too? While some choose to give of their treasure, others voluntarily give of their time and talent. And through these efforts, things get done and people's lives are helped.

What is it that causes us as a society to give in such unselfish ways?

What is it that causes us as a society to give in such unselfish ways? Is it only because we know that others will benefit from our generosity? Or is it also because of something else that comes back to the donor intrinsically that creates a feeling of joy regarding the philanthropic act? We see these altruistic acts displayed over and over again during natural as well as man-made disasters, when families experience personal losses, when individuals need coaching and encouragement in order to attain goals or deal with catastrophic events.

Could society benefit from more of these random acts of kindness directed towards our neighbors? Of course! Communities are as strong and stable as the individuals that reside within them. The question one might ponder is: Can random acts of kindness contribute to and ensure vibrant and sustainable communities today? I believe they can.

Let me propose a possible strategy to achieve such an outcome.

Consider these questions, "How can society create a more generous culture of giving? How can we help people arrive at the point of experiencing the "good feelings" associated with giving more and perhaps taking less? Certainly, family values and actions are factors that influence behaviors, but these behaviors can also be shaped by other components of society, especially schools.

What if the K-20 curricula incorporated a volunteer component such that each student is expected to volunteer during the school year? By including volunteer modules in the curriculum, every student would have exposure to opportunities for selfless giving. If teachers, faculty, administrators, tutors, mentors and other community volunteers teach

and reinforce this message, a new culture of “doing good deeds” through volunteerism could evolve.

We all want to live in vibrant communities that are sustainable. If we commit to changing the philanthropic landscape to encompass a society where everyone’s time, talent and treasure are acknowledged, appreciated and valued, then we have an opportunity to make the world a better place.

As we advance this belief, we must challenge the way people think about giving back to communities. The idea of leveraging the nation’s social capital to build stronger communities is attainable. The passion to create thriving communities is grounded in the belief that ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

As we strive to transform communities by challenging the way we think about philanthropy, reflect on the fact that we are better together – helping, working, living, building, playing, sharing, problem-solving, singing, dancing, and more. Together, we can create a culture of philanthropy that transforms and sustains communities through a lifetime of service as each of us thinks about sharing our gifts with others and acting on those thoughts.

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