

TAMPA TRIBUNE

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More in need, more giving

In a positive twist, job losses may be fueling a surge in volunteerism.

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TAMPA » Mary Lou Pederson saw the dark clouds forming long before the storm hit the mortgage industry. By the time she lost her job, she had a comfortable cushion of savings to keep her afloat.

What she wasn't prepared for was the emotional impact.

"It can be real depressing," she said. "You lose your sense of self-worth and purpose."

It has been a year, and the North Tampa woman hasn't found a paying job since she was a branch coordinator with a national homebuilder. But she has found a new purpose. Twice a week, sometimes more, she volunteers at the Humane Society of Tampa Bay. She grooms, bathes and walks the dogs, meets with prospective adoptive owners, helps out at special events and

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It's puppy love for Mary Lou Pederson, a Humane Society helper.



Keyword: *Be A Volunteer*, for links to ways you can help in the community.



Watch *Meet the Need in action* on Michelle Bearden's "Keeping the Faith" segment at 9 a.m. today on News Channel 8.

MORE GIVING

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cuddles the stray kittens.

She can't give cash as she did in the past. She can, however, give time.

Pederson is among legions of Americans boosting the ranks of volunteers serving animal shelters, soup kitchens, health clinics, school programs and church ministries. The recession has curtailed monetary donations to these charities, at the same time fueling the needs of those they serve.

At the local Humane Society the average donation dropped from \$40 to \$28, while the number of homeless pets taken in grew from 5,300 in 2008 to 7,031 last year.

Strapped charities need the extra volunteers, their skills and experience.

Researchers say there are several reasons for the growing numbers. First, workers who got laid off or were forced to retire and those who saw their hour cut, have more time on their hands. Some volunteers, jobless or not, may be answering President Barack Obama's call to service, issued during his inaugural address, when he challenged citizens to find meaning in "something greater than themselves." Finally, among those who still have financial security, there's a heightened sense of responsibility to help those who don't.

Even Disney World is getting into the act. In September, the corporation announced a Give a Day, Get a Disney Day program in which people who give a day of service at a participating organization can get a one-day pass to one of its theme parks.

Big numbers

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 1.5 million more Americans volunteered from September 2008 to September 2009 than had the previous year. About 63.4 million people, or 26.8 percent of the population, volunteered through or for an organization in 2009, compared with 61.8 million in 2008.

In June, Theresa Goscinski started volunteering at Trinity Cafe, a Tampa nonprofit organization that serves meals to the homeless. She was laid off from her job in public relations a year earlier and wasn't having any luck finding a new one.

"I was restless. I prayed a lot about it because I wanted to do something meaningful," she said. Trinity Cafe founder Jeff



Staff photos by JIM REED

Jamey Kripps listed her needs online, and Connection Church responded. Steve Wulf, left, and other church members made the delivery.

Darrey, a fellow church member at Christ the King Parish, suggested she help out.

Between classes at the University of South Florida and job hunting, Goscinski volunteers at the cafe twice a week. She intends to continue that service when she gets back into the work force.

"They encourage me as much as I try to encourage them," she says of the homeless clients. "This was definitely a benefit to losing my job. I was always too busy before, running in a lot of directions. Now I'm experiencing something that has meaning, and it's made a life-changing impact on my life."

HandsOn Network, the volunteer-focused arm of Points of Light Institute, is the nation's largest volunteer network with more than 250 "action centers" that reach more than 83 percent of the U.S. population and extend to 10 countries. Its network of some 70,000 corporate, faith-based and nonprofit organizations provided 30 million hours of volunteer service in 2008, valued at \$615 million, spokeswoman Catherine Shen said.

Although she has statistics from only the first half of 2009, the increase is substantial compared with the same period the previous year: a 43 percent jump in volunteers, with a 29 percent increase in volunteer projects.

"With all the bad news in the economy, this is definitely hopeful," she said. "For whatever reason, people are responding in full force."

The local scene

Locally, the numbers are just as promising. Stephen Ponzillo, director of the HandsOn Tampa Bay office, with nearly 200 affiliates in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties, said the network welcomed 2,180 new volunteers from July 2008 to December

2009. They served 26,453 hours — a 27 percent increase from the previous year.

When Ponzillo teaches the orientation classes, the new volunteers tell him they want to take some kind of action to improve the community.

"A lot of the folks say they have less money now, but they can always give out food to the homeless, help put a roof on an elderly person's house or tutor a child who needs special attention," he said. "We have a very generous community here."

In October, that was clearer than ever, when 2,200 volunteers from 100 local companies donated their services on the annual Day of Caring. That was a 10 percent increase over the previous year, Ponzillo said.

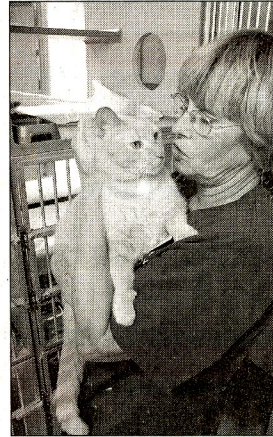
There could be an added benefit to the jobless who volunteer. Tim Marks of Tampa-based Metropolitan Ministries, which has recorded a 25 percent increase in volunteers in the past two years, said at least five people on the nonprofit's staff started off that way.

"They had either lost their jobs or retired early," he said. "They came here to help, and we got to see their business and leadership skills in action. So when positions opened, we hired them. We knew just what we were getting."

Churches hurting, too

Like other organizations with charitable missions, churches have taken a big hit in the coffers. They were on track to raise \$3 billion to \$5 billion less than anticipated in the last quarter of 2008, according to "The Quiet Crisis," a report issued last year by Civic Enterprises, a social-issues think tank.

Even the popular Rick Warren of California's Saddleback Church, author of the best-selling "The Purpose Driven Life,"



Mary Lou Pederson lost her job a year ago and now spends a lot of time at the Humane Society.

was forced to issue a plea to his supporters in late December. With so many people out of work in the congregation, the church was facing a \$900,000 debt. Supporters responded with \$2.4 million in tithes within days.

Churches trying to get by with less staff now have a new tool for helping their congregants help others.

Jim Morgan of Tampa, a former Wall Street investment banker and consultant to Internet companies, saw potential in using the Web to create a Christian volunteer network. After several years spent developing the concept and software, he and his board of directors unveiled the nonprofit Meet the Need site in December.

It works like this: Churches pay a sliding fee of \$50 to \$200 a month, depending on the size of their congregations, to become a member of the Meet the Need network. The site provides more than 500 categories of goods and services needed by local families, organizations and missionaries.

Morgan said the site frees overburdened church staff from serving as the middle man between congregations and recipients of the charity.

"We've got a lot of people in the pews who are looking for ways to act on their faith, but they don't know where to start," he said. "Churches aren't equipped to find all those avenues. Meet the Need does it for them."

In just a few weeks, 38 Bay-area churches have signed up for the service, which is embedded in their own Web sites. Morgan said the plan is to roll it out in communities, then in other states, and within two years, nationally.

Steve Wulf, pastor of the Connection Church, a nondenominational congregation of some 80 members in North Tampa, joined because it brings "ease" to the volunteering process.

"I think this bad economy has realigned our priorities. Even for people who don't have a lot, they still want to give something," he said. "We realize what God has done in our lives, and we want to take that and spread his love and hope to other people around us."

For the church's first project, he scrolled through the "needs" section and picked Jamey Kripps, a single mom of three boys, ages 19, 14 and 19 months, living in an 800-square-foot apartment off Nebraska Avenue. She had been registered on the site by a social services agency.

After he sent out a mass e-mail to his congregation about the family's needs, his members responded quickly. The next day, he and two other church members delivered a toddler's bed, shoes, clothing and a \$100 gift certificate to Wal-Mart to an overwhelmed Kripps. In keeping with Meet the Need's Christian perspective, he also brought Bibles to give to the family.

"I didn't think kindness like this existed in 2010," she told him. "To be truthful, when I first heard about this, I was skeptical. It sounded too good to be true."

More compassion

Volunteerism not only changes the hearts of the recipients, it affects those who give. Josh Carroll, who taught school in North Carolina, moved to Tampa in July with his wife, a nurse, and their 2-year-old daughter.

He presumed he would find a teaching position. But then Hillsborough County public schools announced a hiring freeze. Now he serves meals to the homeless on Tuesdays at Trinity Cafe.

"I've got a whole new perspective and a lot more compassion for people now," he said. "I may not have a job, but I've got a roof over my head and a family to go home to. The work is teaching me a lot about gratitude."

As for Pederson, she's a changed woman as well. If the economy rebounds and the housing industry revives, she's not going back. Her volunteer work at the Humane Society has unleashed a new passion.

Her new career aspiration? "I'm done with mortgages. I want to work with animals."

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