

How Volunteering Can Take You to the Corner Office

Think of successful people, and the mind usually defaults to areas of personal achievement. A Wall Street CEO, maybe, or a hotshot lawyer, or a billionaire founder of a tech start-up.

But what if we defined success in different terms—say, having touched the most people's lives in their time of greatest need? By that standard, the people below might be some of the most successful people in the history of the planet.

Since last August, Reuters has been talking to prominent Americans about the first jobs they ever had, and how those experiences shaped the men and women they are today.

Today we chat with the folks heading up a few of the world's leading nonprofit organizations—and find that their humanitarian impulses often took root at a very early age.

Name: Sophie Delaunay

Title: Executive Director, Doctors Without Borders

First Volunteer Job: Playground building in Egypt

"I was 15 at the time, living in a city called Limoges in the south of France, and with a group of friends decided to travel to Egypt and do some volunteer work at the same time. So we ended up building a playground at a school in Cairo, and also worked in the slums outside the city.

"Egypt was a place I'd always dreamed of, and read about in history books. But we went in August, maybe the worst time possible to go for this kind of assignment. I remember we started collapsing one after another, because everyone was so completely dehydrated. Physically it was extremely difficult, so we weren't very productive.

"Through hardships like that you learn a lot about yourself and others. It was my first humanitarian experience, and it taught me that you really have to have the skills and the means and the capacity to provide meaningful help. It's not enough to just be charitable."

Name: Dr. Helene Gayle

Title: President and CEO, CARE USA

First Volunteer Job: Helping out at Dad's store

"I worked at my father's store in Buffalo, (N.Y.), and I guess you could call it a volunteer job, because when I started at age 13 I was too young to be paid. He had a barbershop and beauty-supply store, and after school my siblings and I would come and work the register and stock the shelves.

"Although it was a business, it was also kind of a community service, because it was really in the heart of the African-American community in Buffalo. It was a true meeting place for people; everybody came in and out of that store.

"That job made me comfortable dealing with a wide range of people, understanding their motivations and learning to judge character. It also taught me about honesty and integrity, because my father trusted us to do everything, including counting the money.

"He died before I finished medical school, but I think he'd be proud of where I am now. Not because of position or status, but because I chose a life that gives back to society. In his own way and with his own business, he was doing the same thing."

Name: Gail McGovern

Title: President and CEO, American Red Cross

First Volunteer Job: Candy striper

"I was a candy striper at Overlook Hospital in Summit, N.J., when I was 15. They gave us these cute little striped uniforms, and we would do little errands like deliver flowers or wheel carts of books around.

"Once they asked me to bring a patient from one location to another, about the length of five city blocks. He looked about 90, and could only take baby steps, but refused to use a walker or get in a wheelchair. He was so frail, and could barely talk, but was so happy to be moving. It took us all morning.

"I remember getting home that day, and literally crawling into bed and crying. He seemed so alone, and yet comforted me more than I comforted him. That job lit something up in me: A desire to help.

"I still get that feeling at the Red Cross, whenever I look into the eyes of someone who needs help. And after every disaster, it's the same routine. You have to be resilient and strong during the day—and then you come home at night and just cry."

Name: Brian Gallagher

Title: CEO, United Way Worldwide

First Volunteer Job: Basketball coach

"When I graduated from college, I was placed as a management trainee for United Way in Winston-Salem, N.C. I had grown up in northwest Indiana, and had never even been to the South before. But I packed up my '73 Nova and drove to my new home.

"I knew nobody there, but I joined a church and went to Sunday mass. In the pews they had put a note about a volunteer opportunity, asking if anyone wanted to coach a 5th and 6th grade basketball team at a local Catholic school called St. Leo's. I signed up and coached that team for three

years.

“We ended up winning a number of regional championships. What I learned from those kids is that fundamentals matter. Be really good at three or four things, practice them over and over again, and you’re going to win a lot.

“What I remember most about arriving in Winston-Salem is that I was scared to death, and I was lonely. But that simple act of saying ‘Yes, I will coach this team,’ connected me to a community forever. We shouldn’t take stuff like that for granted. People volunteering to help others is what builds communities, and makes a great society.”

The writer is a Reuters contributor. The opinions expressed are his own.

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