

Wide, Wide World

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Holland Professional Club

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In the 1950's the host of the Today show was Dave Garraway. He also hosted a Sunday afternoon travel adventure which incorporated geography and the impact people of the United States were having on foreign lands. In the 50's, there were few environmental concerns. The "green" approach was minimal and no one had heard of global warming. The focus was on discovery of the wide, wide world of countries and peoples which the show visited. This show fascinated me for two reasons: First, it was on Sunday and was one of the few shows I could see. More importantly it stimulated my desire to see this wide, wide world of discovery, travel and how I could help others.

It was not until after I retired in 2005 when opportunities seemed to jump out of the woodwork to serve this community. I made some important discoveries. I soon discovered the fund raising for

non-profit groups was not my ideal way of service, but I will still do it.

I also soon discovered that our members are volunteers in many areas locally. Vern Boersma has held migrant workers clinics for years. John Fulenwider tutors at the Boys and Girls Club.

Internationally, John Arendshorst and Eric Snyder operate on eyes in Central America and India. Bob Sterken helps sponsor and work at a local free dental clinic and leads groups to Gracias Honduras for medical and dental brigades. I have only mentioned a few of our members who volunteer locally and internationally.

What made it possible for me to volunteer locally was Michigan's tort reform allowing free malpractice insurance if you did not earn an income from volunteering. This legislation opened up opportunities for me to work at Holland Hospital, in the Wound Care Clinic, at the Community Health Center and the Holland Rescue Mission. I really enjoyed these experiences but was envious of fellow operating room workers who got to go to Honduras. Then, I received an invitation to join a great group for an international medical volunteer experience in Honduras. And now I also go to Nicaragua twice a year with a much smaller group.

Tonight I know that I am preaching to the converted or as they say, "to the choir" but I want you to be aware of the wide range of benefits to this wide wide world of volunteering both to you and to the world when you take a volunteer vacation.

As members of this club look for ways to serve our fellow human beings, I wanted to make you aware of three areas that are desperate for your help that will definitely benefit this world.

Many of us start locally with volunteer experiences. The possibilities for service in Holland are numerous and so worthwhile. It is often easiest to start with your church or other faith based groups. Helping the underserved medically or building houses for them is well-sponsored in our community and as Charlie VanderBroek stated, "This is Holland's social wealth."

The desire to seek life changing trips stimulated over four million Americans yearly to seek an international work experience.

Giving back to the world and adding meaning to our lives are the hallmarks of the volunteer work experience.

You can typically find volunteer opportunities to suit your needs—whether you want all work and no play, mostly work with a little vacation and sight seeing, or even if you want to make it a vacation but do a little good while you are there you can find it. Most trips last one to two weeks and certainly, some last longer.

The popularity of volunteer vacations has arisen from the ability to organize and publicize missions on websites, as well as the ability to blog daily about experiences. The increase in technology has the effect of educating potential volunteers about opportunities and increase the accessibility of the experience. Despite the technology, about half of those volunteering have learned about it through word of mouth. Referrals from friends fuel most of the interest, according to polled volunteers.

The possibilities for service to this wide, wide world are endless. Where and when are easily answered questions. A bigger question is how can I fund it?

Altruism is fine but what will it cost me? Typically costs for seven to ten days for a volunteer experience are around \$1300.

If you choose the right organization to organize your trip the true cost may be surprisingly small. As retirees we all worry about health care costs. Yes, even retired doctors, have to pay for our health care. We are often told that this is our largest expense in retirement. However, as my financial advisor, says, health care costs are not your largest cost. It is taxes. Interestingly enough, the number one cost in retirement—taxes can be offset with the number one goal in retirement—travel. We all want to travel and be able to work, travel and see the world, and be of service. You know the book, 1001 Places To Visit Before You Die, who doesn't think of that?! But to see those places as a volunteer comes with a special reward in that it is entirely or mostly tax deductible. It is a win win situation.

The carefully chosen and planned volunteer vacation can be totally tax deductible as a donation to your cause. Your desire to serve, travel the world, combined with a tax break is well worth exploring. It has got to be the most fun tax strategy around!

Working with an organization will optimize your experience and your charitable gifts with the proper documentation. You will need a letter from the charitable group so that you can deduct the travel, the lodging, the meals and even the extra day at the end for recuperation and sight seeing as part of your working vacation.

My wife and I started the process of adding to a good cause and getting a tax deduction by writing checks and gifting appreciated securities to non profits. Although writing those checks is satisfying, the trips to Good Will with used clothing and household goods is not as rewarding to the benefactor as other ways of helping those in need.

In fact, if you are into AMT, also known as Alternative Minimum Tax, charitable giving is one of the few preference items which

reduce taxes. In other words it is one of the few deductions left for you to benefit from. Finding a well organized charitable group will help you get the proper documentation you need to make your gift count as a deduction.

The next question you will want to answer after choosing a group or organization experienced in international volunteerism is who will be your American leader. This person needs to be able to organize the trip and the materials so you can function. This person needs to keep a cool head and to be on top of the organization of transportation, food, health and safety and other needs. This comes with a lot of experience. Bob and Deb Sterken are the ultimate organizers with the help of other sponsors. Reassuring the volunteers and keeping them calm is a task that is important and requires some talent!

The local leader needs to be fairly organized, honest and have the right contacts in the foreign or host country. They also need to be able to work with immigration. This person needs to organize worthwhile projects and also take care of the safety for the

participants. The local leader in the foreign country will also know of other projects that you could additionally take on. As I talked to the Nicaraguan contact we used for my last trip, I was told how I could set up another trip where my entire family, wife, children and grandchildren could participate. Oh, and also, we could use U.S. dollars, we were told.

After my first trip with Bob and Deb to Honduras in combination with my experiences locally, I felt like I had really found the perfect activity for retirement, adventurous, rewarding, and my wife was happy because I could create a few tax deductions. Then I received a call from a former school mate asking me to be a Doc on a trip to Nicaragua less than one month after I returned from Honduras. And then all of a sudden, I found myself deeply committed to yet another group. What makes it easy for us in Holland are our connections with local faith based groups and the rise of evangelical churches in Central America. Fully 60 to 70% of the people in Central America are now serviced by Protestant Churches.

Well, what are the possibilities of this wide wide world? Where can we serve? Colorado, Montana, England and Provence may sound like provocative titles for the cover of a travel magazine. They also are places that need your assistance. They have archeology digs for your participation.

If Europe is your choice for travel and work, there are volunteer opportunities which are historically and culturally diverse. You could learn more of your host country by working with dolphins in the Hebrides or refurbishing castles in Germany, hiking with orphans in Kyrgyzstan, caring for rescued animals in Greece. Or restoring stone work on castles and farms.

The Middle East may be your interest even with the unrest and the Islamic activism.

Wow, then there is Africa, the poorest continent on the planet. Millions die each year from preventable causes. Does doing circumcisions interest you? How about basic health and sex education for women and men? These missions help prevent HIV

infection. You, too, could help improve the lives of millions of people like Oprah, Bono or Bradgelina, and having 2 names instead of one doesn't mean you can't make a difference.

Instead of a location, you might instead choose your goal and let it take you to where there is a need...such as protecting the environment. This has become especially popular in the US and internationally. My son's college classmates recently wrote a program that was funded which was to clean up the trash on the way up to the top of Mount Everest. How would you like to monitor climate change at the Arctic Circle or in Canada? If you want to look further for programs, look at Asia with four billion people. There will be a program or destination for you. Even Australia and New Zealand have needs for volunteers.

What happens to these volunteers when they return home from these amazing experiences? They, almost without exception, realize that they are the ones who have been helped the most. The satisfaction and joy of having made a difference is a life changing event.

You can rebuild a town, teach reading, help in a feeding program provide medical or dental care or teach English, hug kids with Aids, plant gardens and/ or track elephants. There is no end of programs that can be found or envisioned. They can be set up and you can do what you are interested in or possibly what your career has enabled you to do. Another way to envision a volunteer program is to sign up to do something that you are interested in but have never done. Now you have the opportunity to learn about it and to do this new job. Ask yourself, "What can I do for this world?" Or, "what have I always wanted to do, and how can I help the world at the same time."

I myself am looking forward to going to Central America as my experience as a volunteer grows. Similar opportunities exist there to make a difference. Some examples of programs are tracking jaguars, collecting butterflies, helping with feeding programs for orphanages, fighting Aids.

My job in Honduras and Nicaragua is working with a team providing primary care in villages with little or no access to medical care. We see patients, provide medicines, give de-worming meds and evangelize.

The country of Honduras has a viable maternal health program that provides prenatal care and birth control. Nicaragua provides care for hypertension and diabetes. Nevertheless, there are huge gaps both medically and financially which create great needs for people to have medical care.

Unfortunately both countries have a major health problem due to lack of ventilation for cooking fires. The stoves that the people use are stoves that use wood, inside the huts and have no ventilation. Respiratory infections and reactive airway disease and deaths are directly linked to the use of wood fires inside of a non ventilated house. There are large numbers of people with lung diseases such as asthma and allergies and emphysema to name a few. Even moving the cooking stove outside the hut helps but does not prevent the problem.

An invention called the Lorena stove could save the lives of over a million children. This stove made of mud and sand vents smoke out of a chimney. Respiratory infections and reactive airway disease and deaths are directly linked to the use of wood fires inside of a non-ventilated house. Missions to bring funds and education to these countries to increase the use of this stove is a perfect example of a volunteer opportunity for many, not to mention in lovely locations with wonderful people.

Of the children under 7 years of age who die, 70% of them die from lung disease. We have great hope for these stoves, they can be built on location and help prevent the breathing complications and deaths that so compromise the people. Both Third Reformed Church and Christ Memorial Church have traveled to Central and South America to build these stoves to really make an improvement in the health of these people. Could this be a project for the Holland Professional Club?

The other area of concern I have is clean water. Intestinal parasites and dysentery affect children and adults in Central America as well as the world. Without clean water disease is rampant.

Biological water filters work, are easily installed, do not require chemicals and can be back washed once a month. Dr. Robert McDonald has designed a low cost method of purifying water. This is a Holland Michigan project. Bob McDonald was recently recognized for this effort with the Resthaven Encore award called Seven over Seventy recognizing seven people who, in the later stage of life, did amazing things to help others.

What a way to see a country and learn about it. How many of us have traveled and never entered a local home? Even if you don't have a language skill, your interpreter will provide you with the cultural insights only obtained through a person to person contact.

My interpreter last year in Honduras was named Florence. A large black woman whose mother was Honduran and father was Jamaican. I learned so much from her that week about the plight of

women in Honduras. She was so meaningful to me that I, in my mind, called her "papa" after the figure in the book, The Shack.

Many faith based programs focus on children and their needs. This is a global concern because 80% of the children of the world are born below the poverty level. It is heart wrenching to visit an orphanage for abandoned children and go away not being able to help and adopt.

The opportunity to provide food and health care for children is world wide. Many local leaders and contacts run feeding programs for children and just as an aside, There are always opportunities to help financially.

Your interpreter also may be running a school and you could help with tuition. In Nicaragua, you could support a child's tuition for \$16.00 a month. Be careful how you make this contribution to assure that all of the money gets to the project. Try to run it through a local agency.

I think that while infrastructure is important, education with better health care will improve the skills and empower the children to take their place as citizens of the globe. There is a recognition that we need to concentrate on getting education for girls. The saying goes that if you educate a boy, then you educate the man, but if you educate the girl, you educate a village because certainly if the girls are getting education, then boys certainly will also be getting an education as well.

Linn Gann, a missionary with the Mission Partners India has found that as the women are helped by giving them sewing machines, cows, education, and the knowledge to open a bank account, the entire village improves. The health care, the education, the family are all nurtured and improved. This is so much the case that of the last 100 cows given out, only one cow went to a man. It was the women who joined together, applied, and met the requirements to receive the cow. One board member asked why this was. Linn replied, when a man receives a cow, he sells it, buys alcohol, and drinks it. When a woman receives a cow, she cares for

it, breeds it, and cultivates it into a business which improves the life of the entire village.

Providing the legacy of giving of yourself either locally or globally can also be done as a family. Our family would like to do a volunteer vacation. The experience could be a life changing experience and for certain, it does open up the family to the joy of giving, and to a deeper understanding of others, while at the same time is a great way to have fun and learn together. Our contacts in Central America have plenty of projects for a small group. Our family has three Spanish speakers, a builder, several painters and several medical people. We are anticipating five to seven days of work and then a couple of days of R & R to put the trip in perspective. We see this as a way to give a gift to our kids and grandkids that we can experience with them, and not only that, influence them and their families to become citizens of the world.

There will never be an end to the projects that make a difference in peoples' lives, even the projects that seem like tiny pebbles tossed into a pond have a profound ripple effect toward a

more prosperous healthy world. A desire to change the world is held by many, but acting on that desire, in any positive way, is how the momentum starts and the goal is achieved.

A quote attributed to Bobby Kennedy says that "Few will have the greatness to bend history; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation ... It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is thus shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."¹

What are the best parts of volunteering?

A survey of volunteers that making the world a better place and being able to travel and see the world were seen as very important

benefits to volunteering, as well as being able to make children happy.

If you want to get the most out of your volunteer experience, do your homework and you may find that you can help your bottom line at the same time! Take advantage of tax deductible opportunities, work hard with a positive attitude, recognize things are different than they are at home, and that these differences are positive, not negative! Interact with your host country locals and learn and experience as much as you can about the culture.

Hoping that I have inspired some of you to plan a volunteer vacation, I would be remiss if I didn't leave you with the top 3 things to remember to have with you at all times whenever you volunteer in a developing country: (1) Water impermeable packable raincoat, (2) Cipro for any sort of stomach upset, and (3) carry a roll of toilet paper wherever you go!

When you return with a feeling that you received more than you gave, saw a new culture and lived within it, you will as Dave

Garraway closed his show "Wide Wide World" to be able to say "The World stands on either side no higher than the heart is high. Above the world is stretched the sky and "Peace".