

# BETWEEN YOU AND ME: OUR STORIES

*“What is a volunteer? A volunteer is one who willingly gives of herself—her time, her attention, her brains, heart, and skills and who receives in return a bonus of mind and personality enrichment more potent than any LSD trip.”*



Judy Ringel

These words were written by my mother, Ernestine Greenberger, as part of an essay that was published in 1968 in the alumni magazine of Case Western Reserve University. It was among the treasures I discovered while sorting through her papers after she passed away last summer.

A longtime leader in the Cleveland, Ohio, Jewish community and a determined activist for social justice, Mom had been asked, according to an editor’s note that accompanied the essay, to “share her personal reactions to the entire question of volunteering.” I laughed out loud as I sat on the floor of her apartment, surrounded by piles of old letters and snapshots, and read her comments about some of the radical trends—LSD, “militant neo-feminism”—that marked the turbulent Sixties. But what really struck me was her passionate advocacy for volunteerism—a subject about which, as far as my mother was concerned, there was no question at all.

“Our voluntary organizations are constantly searching out areas of need and devising ways to mend the seams in our fraying social fabric,” she wrote. “Where shall we give our strength today? To the mentally ill? The physically handicapped? The uneducated? The socially deprived? Wherever their feet and skills take them, volunteers find work to do—work which demands every ounce of intelligence, maturity, understanding, and self-discipline which they can give to it. . . . Alone, a volunteer can bring hope and comfort to an individual. Banded together, volunteers can move mountains!”

“Volunteers can move mountains!” Those words are just as true today as they were back in 1968 when my mother wrote them. In fact, as I sat in a meeting of the Social Action Committee a few months ago, I was struck by the realization that the spirit that had driven my mother’s activism—can-do optimism combined with a strong sense of obligation to help repair the world—was the very same spirit that was motivating us to develop Temple Teamwork, a pair of ambitious new projects that will address illiteracy and hunger. I had been searching for an appropriate way to memorialize my mother here in Memphis, and it occurred to me, then and there, that this was the perfect fit. So Nick and I, along with our children and grandchildren, have chosen to honor my mother’s memory and perpetuate her commitment to social action by funding Team Read and Team Garden.

Team Read will use a proven, step-by-step method to boost the reading ability of second-graders at Wells Station Elementary School, and Team Garden will establish and maintain a vegetable garden on the Temple property that will supply fresh produce to the Memphis Food Bank.

Both projects are exciting. Both will need teams of dedicated volunteers, and we encourage Temple members of all ages to get involved. As my mother put it in that long-ago essay, “The challenges [for volunteers] are endless and irresistible; the opportunities endless; the doors are wide open. Come on in!”

L’Shalom,  
Judy Ringel

Next time you are in conversation with a Memphian of the Christian faith, ask your friend the following question: “Out of the approximately 1 million people living in Shelby County, how many would you guess are of the Jewish faith?” (Remind your friend that 10% is 100,000.)



Rabbi Greenstein

When I told a longtime Christian community volunteer the answer to that question, he could not believe that less than 10,000 Memphians, fewer than 1%, are Jewish. “That’s impossible,” he said, “when you consider all the Jewish families and individuals involved in everything from MIFA and the Church Health Center to BRIDGES, the Child Advocacy Center, the Mid-South Food Bank, fighting cancer and heart disease, the arts, and....” I cut off my friend before he could name another cause for which Jews volunteer and to which Memphis Jews contribute. “Stop,” I said. “You are right that all those causes have Jewish volunteers, but if you look closely, it’s the same people! There aren’t that many of us, but voluntarism is at the heart of Judaism, for we are here as God’s partners to help heal and repair this shattered world.

The concluding Aleinu in our prayerbook is the clarion call to social justice. The liturgy reads, “[You are] to repair the world [*tikkun olam*] for the sake of bringing God’s dominion on earth, so that all humankind will call Your Name One....”

The jewel in the Reform Jewish crown always has been the primacy of spreading Judaism’s social justice message. We are called to feed the hungry, teach the illiterate how to read, heal the hurt of child sexual abuse and violence against women, clothe the naked, and help get the homeless off the streets not because it’s a nice thing to do, but because this is precisely what God calls us to do as Jews.

There are many gardens and reading programs because God needs so many of us to repair and heal, teach, and till. The Team Read and Team Garden initiatives inspired by Ernestine Greenberger emanate from our role as Jews to be repair people. Finally, you don’t have to overcommit or promise what you can’t deliver. You can use this opportunity to get to know kindred spirits within the Temple Israel family who are interested in devoting an hour to teach others to read and/or grow food to feed the hungry.

An ancient Jewish text reminds us that, “A blanket warms a person, but not a stone.” Interestingly, someone who is generous in Hebrew is called “Nediv-Lev,” someone with a generous heart. When we give of our time and resources, we fulfill our mandate as Jews to be like God.

L’Shalom,  
Rabbi Micah Greenstein

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