

An Ode to the Unsung Volunteer

by SHERALYN ROMAN

While I will readily admit there's a bit of a personal twist to this article, a particular event that sparked this conversation, as I spoke with others at various events around town, it appears there's a common thread amongst us all.

As I suspected, this story might not be so personal after all. I found that on the topic of the 'unsung volunteer' many families share an experience much like my own. Perhaps you'll agree. This column is an ode to the unsung volunteer.

You will never see an unsung volunteer. They aren't looking for the limelight and often any attempt to shine a light on them is rebuffed at every opportunity. They are the folks who donate food during a neighbourhood parade or a holiday craft market because it's a good thing to do. The hockey team or school that run food drives and the local businesses who help them deliver the food. More than anything, they are the people who quietly collect that food, sort it out in their garage late on a cold and blustery wintry night and then pack up the boxes and form a train of volunteer cars to deliver them to The Exchange with little fanfare. Thank you to everyone, for helping to feed Caledon families.

The unsung volunteers are the families who take their children to a local store with money they've saved up, and then watch as their child picks out an item they would cherish but which they will instead, willingly donate so that another child can enjoy the holiday season. Thank you for teaching your children the value, and true meaning, of charitable giving.

Unsung volunteers are the people behind the scenes in the homes of many of our community volunteers who do so much. They are the spouses who watch the children while the other can attend a planning meeting, spend time at an event or who cook dinner because the front-facing volunteer has been too busy. They are the spouses who drop everything when you suddenly realize the window of the convertible you volunteered to drive in the holiday parade (and from which Santa is supposed to be happily waving) is stuck in the 'up' position and then spends their afternoon literally re-wiring the car so the window will go down. They are the spouses that raise the tents, help you fix a glitch on the computer that holds the entire league's soccer schedule or who drive across town to pick up a 'Santa Mailbox' that another volunteer has quietly constructed and painted in their 'spare time' for a school to use. They are the friends or family that drive or pick up your kid from school, or hockey practice or anything really, because you can't get there due to a Board meeting for the non-profit social service agency you volunteer with. Thank you for sharing your particular talents and skill sets for the benefit of the whole community who will often never know the vital role you played in an event's success.

They are your children! Ask any volunteer about why they do what they do and most will respond with two thoughts: it's to help the community in which they live to be the best it can be AND it's to set an important example for their children about helping others. These are admirable. Often, the lessons become real when the children are pressed into service behind the scenes with requests to 'help stuff these envelopes,' or 'help sort and stack these boxes full of (insert team sport) uniforms,' and 'we just have to make two quick stops on the way home to pick up items for next week's (insert special charity event here).'

Our children might be tired from a long day at school, hungry, facing exam stress or a myriad of other thoughts and feelings, but they sit alongside you and help you stuff those envelopes anyway! Our children are the ones who might miss out on bedtime stories or family time around the dinner table so that you can do what you do. Thank you for modelling volunteerism to your children and thank your children for giving you the time and space to help others.

I know that many of you will relate to these thoughts. I'm sure you can think of many times your family has sacrificed time with you so that you can volunteer. It might be your picture in the Annual Report of 'X' charity but there's an entire team of unsung volunteers behind you that has not only helped you to be there but probably also donated some of their own time, skills and expertise too - just quietly, behind the scenes. At this time of year in particular, when so many need our support to help them manage through the holiday season, thank you to all the volunteers who make things happen and all the unsung volunteers who support them.