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Special report

Millennials a force for change

'Civic generation' rolls up its sleeves to lend a hand at home and abroad, striving for a difference

By Andrea Stone
USA TODAY

Jobs are scarce. Money is tight. A speedy economic recovery seems unlikely. Yet none of that has stopped the Millennial Generation from helping others. Young adults who grew up in the shadow of the 9/11 attacks and saw the wreckage of Hurricane Katrina are volunteering at home and abroad in record numbers. The generation that learned in school to serve as well as to read and write, the Millennials were the first global Internet explorers even as they pioneered social networking for favorite causes at home.

"Community service is part of their DNA. It's part of this generation to care about something larger than themselves," says Michael Brown, co-founder and CEO of City Year, which places young mentors in urban schools. "It's no longer keeping up with the Joneses. It's helping the Joneses."



By Karen Sayre for USA TODAY

All for all: City Year volunteers Adrienne Shea, Josh Murphy, center, and James Paradis join in a unity cheer before heading to work with children at Francis Stevens Education Campus in Washington as tutors and mentors.

Surveys show people born between 1982 and 2000 are the most civic-minded since the generation of the 1930s and 1940s, say Morley Winograd and Michael Hais, co-authors of *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics*.

Unlike culturally polarized Baby Boomers or cynical Gen-Xers, this is "a generation of activist doers," they write.

"Other generations were reared to be

more individualistic," Hais says. "This civic generation has a willingness to put aside some of their own personal advancement to improve society."

Michelle Trahey, a Penn State marketing major, has turned down three job offers so she can work for two years in a New York City elementary school as a Teach for America corps member. Trahey, 22, says friends thought she was "crazy" since many college graduates can't find jobs. Her parents

weren't pleased, either.

"My passion is helping people and making a difference," she says. "This is the perfect time for me not to focus on business. ... If I don't do this now, I may never have this opportunity again."

Trahey is among 3,700 college graduates who will join Teach for America next fall. Nearly 25,000 applied, a 37% increase over 2007 and the most since the program began in 1990, says spokeswoman Amy Rabinowitz. Nearly every government-funded service program has seen applications spike.

City Year, where monthly stipends are about \$1,000, saw applications triple last year. Applications to the Peace Corps, which sends volunteers to work in other countries, are up 16%. AmeriCorps, which sends young adults into schools, health clinics, parks and other local organizations, has three applicants for every slot.

The Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that oversees Ameri Corps and other programs, says volunteer rates for ages 16-24 nearly doubled from 1989 through 2005, from 12.3% to 23%.

Winograd says those are the peak formative years for Gen-Xers and Millennials. He says it was rare for those now in their 30s and 40s to perform community service in high school. More than 80%

of Millennials did it, often because it was required.

Although the volunteer rate for young adults declined to 21.9% in 2008, nearly three in five 18- to 24-year-olds surveyed by the Harvard University Institute of Politics said they were interested in public service. Statistics compiled by the Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversee AmeriCorps and other programs, show that college towns such as Provo, Utah; Iowa City and Madison, Wis., have among the country's highest volunteer rates.

The United Way, which was founded in 1887 to raise money for charities, opened campus chapters in 2008. It hopes to have 50 by next year, many of them offshoots of spring break programs in which students give up the beach for projects helping others.

Kathryn Yaros, a student at University of Michigan-Dearborn who is a United Way team leader, spent freshman spring break helping build a wheelchair ramp so a paralyzed man could leave his Detroit home. This spring she worked at a residential treatment center for troubled girls.

"Volunteering is not such a casual thing anymore. It's part of our lifestyle," says Yaros, 19. "Giving back is our own way of being empowered to create a positive change within the community."

Analysts cite several reasons Millennials are stepping up:

► **The times.** Just as the Great Depression and World War II shaped their grandparents' generation, Millennials view the world through the lens of 9/11, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the economic meltdown.

"The events you grow up with have a lot to do with what a generation focuses on," says Alan Solomont, chairman of the Corporation for National and Community Service. "This generation grew up at a time when there was a need to pull together."

Hard times, says City Year's Michael Brown, produce "values clarification."

► **Global connections.** Because of the Internet, social networking sites such as Facebook, the growth of study-abroad programs and ethnic diversity, the Millennials are closely attached to the world and want to make it a better place.

Whether it's teaching English in China or building a well in Africa, Millennials are "in tune" with global needs, says Philip Gardner of the Collegiate Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University. He says many who study abroad — 70% of students at four-year colleges have traveled outside the United States — "get the bug to go back internationally, and one of the fastest ways ... is to do volunteer projects."

Amanda MacGurn studied in Belgium, taught English in Chile and interned with Doctors Without Borders. Now 26, the Southern Oregon University graduate leaves next month for Romania to work for the Peace Corps.

"I want to devote my life to international service work," says MacGurn, who lives in Eugene, Ore. "This is a great opportunity to serve both my country as an ambassador and also the international community."

► **Practicality.** Required to volunteer in high school and encouraged by colleges to keep it up, Millennials responded to Hurricane Katrina with outcomes they could see.

Thousands spent their college spring breaks on the Gulf Coast where they helped clear debris, patch roofs and rebuild homes after the 2005 storm.

Millennials don't want to send money and forget it, Solomont says. "They want to get things done, to fix things," he says. Unlike Baby Boomers, "They're not into chasing their own ideologies as much as rolling up their sleeves and improving things."

Emory University student Maria Town, 21, who has cerebral palsy, started Alternative Life Cycles, an organization to provide retrofitted bicycles for disabled



By Karen Sayre for USA TODAY

Mentoring: Donald Morgan left, and Darius Williams laugh with City Year volunteer Josh Murphy at an education center in Washington.

people, because she knew how expensive her own adapted recumbent tricycle was. "I've learned it's a full life commitment that can be more than just a hobby," says the Hammond, La., native. "It can be a career."

► **The Obama effect.** Millennial voters last year preferred Barack Obama 2 to 1. Many embraced the former community organizer's call to service.

Online applications to the Peace Corps spiked 175% in the days surrounding his inauguration, says spokeswoman Laura Lartigue.

"We are seeing a rebirth of the kind of idealism that we saw during the Kennedy era" of the 1960s, when the Peace Corps was founded, she says, noting that the average age of Peace Corps volunteers is 27.

Obama's election was "a signal that young people really do matter," says Roger Gu, 21, who will work for Teach for America in Los Angeles after graduating from Princeton University this spring. "I don't want to sound corny or lame, but I believe individuals can make a difference," he says.

► **Economic troubles.** A miserable job market is an added reason to volunteer.

"When the economy is downsizing full-pay job opportunities, many are looking at these stipend and volunteer opportunities as a good alternative," says Patrick Rooney of the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana

University. He says recent graduates are more likely than older adults to work for little or no pay because they have yet to start families or take on mortgages.

Rabinowitz of Teach for America has seen a change at student job fairs. "We were going head-to-head" with Wall Street firms, she says. Lately, "There's been much less competition."

At 20, Colorado College sophomore Eleanor Mulshine hasn't chosen a career, but she has traveled to the Gulf Coast twice to help with hurricane recovery, trekked to a village in India to build compost pits and worked on a New Mexico farm that promotes sustainable agriculture. Between classes in Colorado Springs, she helps refugees adapt to their new home.

Mulshine says she learned the value of helping others from her parents, who are "heavily involved" in their Washington, D.C., neighborhood.

"I'm trying to give back," she says. "What else would I do with my spare time?"