

## ***How do YOU want to make a difference?***

NGOs? Protests? Both are important options. But how about Politics?

Most of us want to give back to our communities -- somehow. For most of us, when we see something that isn't right, or people suffering, we want to improve the situation, make it better for people. We see it everywhere, people volunteering their help at food banks, at libraries, at women's shelters. People join environmental groups like Greenpeace or the David Suzuki Foundation because they want to protect the environment. Young people play free concerts at retirement homes and older people volunteer their time at early learning centres. Men and women volunteer as coaches of kids' sports teams. Masses of volunteers keep the United Way going, both in doing work on the ground helping those less fortunate and in fundraising for local programs. There are people who spend their own money to go abroad to poor countries to help build schools. Local ratepayers associations are formed and run by community residents to monitor, influence and otherwise affect change where needed for their local communities.

There is clearly no shortage of people wanting to help others – which is wonderful. And there are many ways to be involved, and to help. The list of options for volunteerism and for getting involved is almost limitless, ranging from the individual – the person just helping an elderly neighbour shovel their walk – all the way to massive and well-organized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that deal with environmental issues, human rights (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International), affordable housing (Habitat for Humanity)... These are only a tiny fraction –the number and influence of NGOs has grown tremendously over the last number of years, and there's at least one for every "cause" you can imagine.

Protesting in the streets is another way to try and effect change – to make a difference. The classics of course were the massive protests in the United States against the Vietnam War and to achieve civil rights for blacks. The goal of the any protest is to affect or influence public opinion – and ultimately, through public opinion, to influence the actions of political leaders and decision-makers. Being able to protest is a fundamental aspect – indeed, a fundamental strength -- of democracy. Recently we saw protests in the US against the Keystone XL pipeline – protests that, arguably, affected President Obama's decision to approve or not approve.

But what about a third option? Politics itself?

The work of some NGOs affects people or situations directly – food banks are a great example. But – in the case of poverty and food bank use, if one were to look at the challenge on a larger scale, it is politicians who decide on legislation, budgets, spending choices and other policies that can either reduce, on the one hand -- or exacerbate on the other -- the poverty that causes people to use the food banks in the first place. I know of many people who have given much of their time and money to travel abroad to help build schools in poor countries that need them – but it's politicians who are able to make decisions on foreign aid that could provide funding for hundreds of schools. I know people who pitch in with their hammers to help build houses through Habitat for Humanity – it's a great cause. But it's the politicians who can make budget and regulatory decisions that would encourage the building of

thousands of units of affordable housing. It's legislation – the laws of the land – that matter. We need strong environmental regulations, strong workplace health and safety regulations, strong financial regulations, strong spending allocation decisions – the list goes on. We need good people in politics to make the decisions that best affect our communities, our society and our country -- on a much larger scale than one shovel at a time.

I have heard many people, particularly more recently, discouraging people from getting involved in politics – suggesting that they can be more effective by helping out with a specific NGO, charity, or other protest group. Often it's accompanied by negative comments about politicians and their motives. Well, I can assure you that (although not everyone), there are many politicians who actually do what they do in order to accomplish some good – to make a difference. And all of the wonderful things that we take for granted in this country didn't happen by accident – they happened because smart, capable and thoughtful politicians ran governments and passed legislation that, for the most part, has ensured a relatively prosperous, democratic, open and welcoming country. So to all those who are looking for ways to make their communities, their country or their world better, I urge you to consider, along with your other options, getting involved with politics. There are several ways to do it. In a campaign, you can encourage the election of someone you respect and who you believe will work for those larger policies that can do good. You can find a politician you like and respect, and volunteer to help him or her do their work. Or – you can run for public office yourself and BE one of those decision-makers.

We need people in the NGOs, supporting charities, doing good works in your communities – and your work is hugely appreciated. But we also need good politicians to participate in making those final decisions. I encourage people all the time to consider running for office, because our communities, our country, our society all need good people to step up. If anyone is interested in learning more about running for public office, please drop me a line at [info@marthahallfindlay.ca](mailto:info@marthahallfindlay.ca)