

Stick Your Neck Out

A Street-Smart Guide
to Creating Change
in Your Community and Beyond



SERVICE AS THE PATH OF A MEANINGFUL LIFE

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An Excerpt From

***Stick Your Neck Out:
A Street-Smart Guide to Creating Change in Your Community
And Beyond***

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PREFACE

I WROTE THIS book because I care about the future of our communities and our planet. I wrote it because I have the experience to help solve the public problems that challenge us; I've had failures that have taught me which paths not to take, and successes that have confirmed the ideas and actions that work.

Three key ideas anchor this book:

Courageous and compassionate people can solve any problems and meet any challenges, in their communities and in the world.

The surest path to a meaningful life is service—acting for the common good.

The key to success on this path is balance—head and heart, trust and street smarts, passion and professionalism, reflection and action.

As a young man, I didn't have these ideals or ideas. A Foreign Service Officer for the first 15 years of my professional life, I dealt with conflicts and chaos in the Third World, ignoring the suffering I saw and savoring the adventures. I cultivated a John Wayne image that I really thought was who I was. Then a battle in Vietnam forced me to confront the irresponsibility and shallowness of my life. Gradually I began to change. At the United Nations I finally learned that I could

use my skills and experience to build peace and justice rather than their opposites.

I left the Foreign Service in 1980 and began creating a series of workshops helping others to create positive political change in their communities and beyond. In 1983 I merged this work with the Giraffe Heroes Project, an international nonprofit founded the year before by Ann Medlock, a New York writer and editor. Ann was convinced that, in a society grown apathetic and cynical, telling people the stories of real heroes was a powerful way to inspire them to stick their own necks out for the common good. She was right.

The project's strategy was and is simple: We find people already acting with courage and compassion to solve important public problems, and then get the stories of these "Giraffes" told over radio and television and in print. That publicity brings Giraffes attention, support, and—in the case of some Giraffes who are challenging powerful institutions—protection.

But the most important purpose of telling the stories of Giraffes is to move others to follow their lead. People hear or see these compelling stories and are inspired to take action on problems important to *them*. Since 1990 the project also has been using Giraffe stories as the basis for programs for schools, moving young people to lives of courage, compassion, and active citizenship. There's a vast amount of information about this work on the Giraffe Heroes Project Web site (www.giraffe.org).

You'll find stories of Giraffes throughout this book—a sampling of the many hundreds we've honored so far. Giraffes are men, women, and kids, from many races, religions, and backgrounds. They're truck drivers, students, retirees, artists, waitresses, doctors, homemakers, businesspeople, and teachers. Giraffes are working on just about every problem you can think of, from poverty to gang violence to environmental pollution. They're people like

- *Casey Ruud, a safety inspector who put his job on the line when he refused to ignore glaring threats to public safety at the Hanford nuclear plant (see sidebar, page 82);*
- *Ernesto "Neto" Villareal, a high school kid in Idaho who led a campaign to stop racist insults in his school and community (see sidebar, page 8);*
- *Andy and Vashti Hurst, who walked away from a comfortable life to fight poverty, disease, and injustice on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation (see sidebar, page 10).*

Giraffes are not supermen or superwomen, and they're certainly not saints. They're ordinary people who see a problem and decide to do something about it, despite the risks and obstacles.

At the Giraffe Heroes Project we recognize that inspiration is often not enough, so we provide practical tools that help people translate their inspiration into focused, successful actions. To create these tools, we expanded the three ideas that anchor this book into a set of strategies and techniques that can help anyone make a difference.

I've tested and refined these tools myself, as a diplomat at the United Nations, as an environmental activist helping forge common-ground solutions in land-use battles in the Pacific Northwest, and now as a peacemaker in the Middle East and Africa. I've taught many people how to use these tools in more than 20 years of speeches and workshops for communities, cities, issue groups, companies, government agencies, universities, and labor unions. Now I've put them into this book.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

This book is for people who see problems in their communities or beyond and want to help solve them. It's written for people with a wide range of experience and skill:

- *If you're concerned about a public problem but don't have a lot of—or even any—experience to take it on, this book can inspire you to get started, build your skills, guide your steps, and serve as a ready reference.*
- *If you're a seasoned activist, then in this book you'll find challenging new topics, provocative twists on familiar topics, and helpful tips and techniques to add to what you already know. If some of the sections are too basic for you, you'll find them helpful in training others.*

This book is for people acting alone, with small teams, or as members of large organizations. It's for the individual who wants to write a persuasive letter to the editor, for a group of parents concerned about a problem in their kids' school, and for a Sierra Club committee fighting global warming.

This book is for followers—the quiet, behind-the-scenes people who do so much of the work. It's for leaders—the up-front people,

including committee chairs, team captains, event organizers, elected officials, and the person who takes responsibility when nobody else does. It's also for people in groups and teams in which leadership is shared.

Finally, while this book focuses on solving public problems, 20 years of giving workshops has taught me that you can use the ideas here in many other areas of your life. No matter what challenges you might take on, the concepts and coaching tips in this book will increase your chances for success. You may be trying to resolve a conflict with a family member, for example, or trying to reach an agreement with a difficult neighbor or cope with a stressful situation at work. This book can help you take the right steps in all those contexts.

HARD AND SOFT

You'll quickly notice a major theme in this book: that creating change as an active citizen requires much more than intellect, energy, and force of will. These hard-edged qualities are needed, but they're not enough. After more than two decades in this work, I'm convinced that treating citizen activism solely as an intellectual and political pursuit is like watching a television set with only one channel—huge amounts of needed insights and information are missing. A large part of this book is about tuning in to those other channels. I've found the following to be true:

- *What most often separates success from failure in active citizenship is a positive and compassionate spirit, as well as competence in the so-called soft skills that flow from such a spirit—such as building trust, communicating with sensitivity, and inspiring others.*
- *Being an active citizen is not just about solving problems. It's also about becoming fully alive—about the meaning and passion you can add to your own life by getting involved. The information in this book not only can change your world, but it can also change your life, as it has done for me and many others.*

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The chapters fall into three categories (some into more than one):

■ Action Steps

Chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5 lead you through a progression of moves for creating and carrying out a project, from identifying the problem you want to work on to making a plan to deal with it. These chapters are especially valuable if you are starting from scratch on a new project.

■ Skills Building

Chapters 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 tell you what you need to know to handle specific challenges, from building a team to dealing with bureaucracies. Some of these chapters are more relevant to your situation than others, depending on the nature of the problem you've taken on.

■ Qualities of Spirit

The first part of chapter 1, chapters 3 and 6, and the epilogue discuss deeper topics relevant to active citizenship, including meaning, trust, courage, connectedness, and responsibility. I've deliberately woven these chapters throughout the book, since that's how I see successful activism working in real life: how-to steps and motivations from the heart melding with and reinforcing each other.

In addition, three ongoing case studies thread through the book, while shorter case studies illustrate specific points.

WHAT'S NOT IN THIS BOOK

There are some standard elements of active citizenship, such as fund-raising, developing Web sites, and incorporating as a non-profit, on which there are already dozens of existing guides. I saw no point in reiterating that basic information in this book. Instead, I've given you references on these standard topics (see "Resources"), adding my own insights only where I felt they were unique and important.

INTRODUCTION

One of the great liabilities of history is that all too many people fail to remain awake through great periods of social change.

Every society has its protectors of the status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent. . . . But today our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

WHAT DO YOU CARE ABOUT?

WHAT ARE THE public problems that test our times?

At the local level, “public problems” might include anything that makes your community less supportive and safe, such as failing schools, violence, poverty, homelessness, transportation snarls, unwise development, or corrupt and ineffective government.

Many of these same problems exist at the regional and national levels, in addition to rising health-care costs, environmental pollution, and shredded social-welfare nets.

And while there are more than enough public problems and challenges at home, we’re all citizens of a rapidly shrinking world, where the effects of globalization, terrorism, and regional conflicts make us all more aware of just how close—and dangerous—that world is. The rosy future promised by global free trade has yet to be realized by most of the world’s have-nots, who know very well from television and the Internet how the other half lives. Warlords in failed states make violence an everyday event for much of the world’s population. Half the planet is becoming a powder keg of frustrated expectations—and a recruiting ground for global terrorism.

USER’S GUIDE

Perhaps for you the problem to work on is already clear: you see a pressing challenge that’s not getting handled, for example, or a government or corporate policy you think is dumb or dangerous. Perhaps you’ve already joined an organization or group working on it. If that’s the case, then you might skip to chapter 1. If it’s *not* clear to you what problem has your name on it, however, then read on.

Behind all these problems is a larger one. The end of the Cold War freed up resources and created unparalleled opportunities to advance the causes of peace and justice, both at home and abroad. Instead, in my view, we've produced a profound and selfish shallowness. Especially in the western world, we've become consumers more than citizens. What happened to the concept of the common good? Of looking beyond the welfare of ourselves and our families and paying serious attention to the welfare of others we may not know, and of the planet we all live on?

KEY POINT ■ *The challenge now is to take responsibility, not just for solving the problems staring us in the face, but for doing so in ways that revive the common good—that bring people closer together instead of pushing them further apart. This book describes those ways.*

WHAT PROBLEM DO YOU TAKE ON?

■ **Problems in Your Face**

Sometimes a problem confronts you in ways that are direct and personal. Giraffe Lois Gibbs, for example, became a crusader against toxic waste when she saw her own kids getting sick (see sidebar, page 4). Here's how some kids found *their* problem, right at their schoolhouse door.

CASE STUDY **The Discovery School**

The Discovery School, in Coupeville, Washington, is a public school for kids challenged by schoolwork, discipline, or both. Following the Giraffe curriculum then used by the school, the kids asked themselves what problem they cared about most. The choice was easy. Several students had almost been hit by cars that were speeding past the school grounds, ignoring the speed limit to get to the nearby ferry landing. The kids knew that these weren't the only close calls, and that if something wasn't done, somebody was going to get seriously hurt or killed. The lack of traffic safety around their school was the problem they wanted to tackle.

The students started off their project by videotaping speeding cars, clocking them with a stopwatch on a measured distance, and graphing the results. Then they interviewed workers in the area about close calls these people had seen. With that data in hand, they got a state trooper to confirm their findings with his radar gun. They got one of the county commissioners to visit their school to see the problem for himself, and then they made a formal presentation to all the commissioners. The result was a \$12,000 traffic light, a crosswalk, and the admiration of everyone who witnessed what they'd accomplished.

■ Suggestions for Your Search

Maybe there isn't a problem right in front of you, but you're open to getting involved if one appears. Don't wait for somebody else to find it for you. Actively seek that challenge important to you and then take it on with everything you've got. Here are some suggestions for your search.

Look around. Look at all the things in your community and country and world that you think aren't going right. For example:

- *Are there people in your community who don't have enough food or who have no shelter?*
- *Are you concerned about the impact of money on politics?*
- *Is the air where you live fit to breathe and the water fit to drink?*
- *Are there global problems that concern you: environmental or economic problems, for example, or human rights problems? In today's interconnected world, local actions, such as consumer boycotts, can have global impacts. It was consumer pressure, for example, that led Home Depot to stop making patio furniture out of wood from old-growth forests overseas.*

Which of these problems do you care most about? Which do you always seem to be talking about with your friends? Which animate your voice and body language?

TRY THIS ■ Watch the local and national news every night, and read the newspaper. Ask your spouse and friends—and your kids, if you have any—what they think needs fixing. Then make a list of the problems that resonate most with you.

Take an inventory of your background and experiences, and of what you like to do and what you're good at. Those elements are not in your life as accidents. If you assume, as I do, that there is purpose to existence, then it's hard to avoid the conclusion that personal attributes, whether innate or acquired, are there in order to be used. So if you're really good at working with preschoolers, or giving speeches, or balancing budgets, consider these as indicators of where your path of service may lie.

TRY THIS ■ Make a résumé—or update the one you have—as if you were applying for a job as an active citizen. Then read it as if you were the “employer.” What job would you hire yourself to do?

Don't rely too much on your mind. The answers you seek will come at least as much from your heart as from your head.

TRY THIS ■ Take some quiet time and be open to signs, hunches, and intuitive leaps that might help you find your path.



A GIRAFFE STORY

Lois Gibbs

As a young housewife and mother, Lois Gibbs learned that her Love Canal neighborhood, in Niagara Falls, New York, was built on a toxic-waste dump. Her children were sick, possibly fatally. She had to do something. Gibbs set out to talk to neighbors about what they could do. But she was so unsure of herself that she quit after knocking on one door. Reminding herself that people's lives were at stake, she went back out and knocked on door after door. People called her nuts, or “that hysterical housewife.”

“Experts” told her she didn't know what she was talking about, but she kept on, gradually persuading other people to question what was going on and not to trust the corporate polluters and government officials who said that nothing was wrong. Eventually, the effort she started got all 900 families in Love Canal relocated.

Gibbs also went to Congress, where she made sure that what had happened at Love Canal powered a drive to create the Superfund, a multibillion-dollar federal program that forces polluters to clean up their toxic messes.

Gibbs went on to found the Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes, now called the Center for Health, Environment and Justice, which helps other toxin-plagued communities not only clean up

■ It's Not All or Nothing

Sticking your neck out to help solve public problems—becoming an active citizen—doesn't necessarily mean bailing out of the for-profit world. There are great opportunities in that world, not just to produce needed products at fair prices, but also to provide decent livelihoods for workers, to contribute to communities, and to model what it takes to combine a civic consciousness with a successful bottom line.

It also doesn't necessarily mean upending your life. It may simply mean doing what you do in a different way. Once, after a speech I'd given in Florida, I was stopped in the hall by the publisher of a major newspaper, a man who'd reached the top of his profession in his mid-40s and saw no more peaks to reach. "How can I step down from all this?" he asked. I asked him why he wanted to step down at all. His state was dealing with unchecked growth, racial violence, and a deteriorating environment. What if he were to transform his mission from selling newspapers into helping solve those problems? With a mission of service, he could stay right where he was, stick his neck out, and use his own editorial pages to help create and promote solutions.

Finally, active citizenship is not about being a superhero. It's about starting from where you are, using your talents, personality, enthusiasm, and preferences. You don't have to save the world—maybe the problems that grab your attention are small. Maybe they have to do with some big, pressing social concern, and maybe they don't. Your cause doesn't have to be something intrinsically noble, like feeding the hungry or freeing the oppressed. Most problems are much more "ordinary" than that, but that doesn't mean they are any less worth solving, or that doing so would be any less satisfying.



A GIRAFFE STORY

continued

the poisons, but also work for safe jobs, drinkable water, uncontaminated foods, recycling, and reduction and proper disposal of wastes. The center has an active membership of over 5,000 grassroots organizations and handles about 1,500 requests for assistance every year.

Lois Gibbs went from being a shy housewife, afraid to talk to her neighbors, to being a national leader on an issue of vital concern, all because keeping her family and other families safe from toxic wastes meant so much to her. She didn't find the meaning in her life from getting her picture in the papers—although she did become famous. She found her meaning in service, first to her kids, and then to the nation.

Web link: Center for Health, Environment and Justice (www.chej.org).

I worked with Evelyn Schaeffer, a remarkable activist in rural Ohio whose problem was getting her phone company to provide toll-free calling within Ashtabula County. Schaeffer saw that having to make long-distance calls to people who were nearly neighbors not only ran up the bill, but it also stifled a sense of community. The crusade she led improved the quality of life for a lot of people in one little corner of Ohio. As she wrote recently, “What we did succeeded, and that mattered to me, to all the others who worked on the campaign, and to all those people who still stop me in the street and say, ‘You’re the lady who got us decent phone service.’”

PLAY IT AGAIN

- *We face many public problems. Behind all of them is the larger challenge of reviving the common good.*
- *Many people never look for a problem to work on—it finds them and won’t let go.*
- *Look at all the things in your community and country and world that you think aren’t going right; maybe one of those problems has your name on it. Local actions, such as consumer boycotts, can have global impacts.*
- *Asking what you care about can help you find a problem to work on. Taking an inventory of your background and experiences, and of what you like to do and what you’re good at, will help, too; those elements are no accident. Spend part of your search in silence, and pay attention to signs, hunches, and intuition.*
- *Sticking your neck out to help solve public problems—becoming an active citizen—doesn’t require upending your life. It may simply mean doing what you do in a different way. You don’t have to save the world; maybe the problems that grab your attention have to do with some big, pressing social concern, and maybe they don’t.*

WHAT’S NEXT?

Active citizenship is tough work, and sticking your neck out for what you believe in is, well, risky. Why do it? Why you? Chapter 1 suggests some answers.

CHAPTER ONE

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of Nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW,
Man and Superman

WHY DO IT?

WHY HELP YOUR community deal with racism or failing schools? Why press for cleaner air or water, join a neighborhood association, or attend boring hearings on traffic, land use, or homelessness? Why spend hours searching the Web for data on trade or terrorism? Why send letters and e-mails to your congressperson or your mayor? Why stand up to speak your mind when even your friends wish you'd sit down and shut up?

It's hard and often thankless. It takes time you don't have. It's often a hassle.

So why do it? It's a whole lot easier to stay on the sidelines, wanting and expecting "someone" (the government, perhaps?) to solve the problems—meanwhile complaining that things aren't the way you want them to be.

One motivation for getting involved might be sheer frustration and anger over the injustice or incompetence you see. Something isn't working, or someone's being hurt, or some government or company authority keeps making the same mistake over and over again and nobody seems able or willing to get it right. You think, how can they be so stupid/greedy/gutless? Suddenly you've had enough, and you pick up the phone . . .

We all understand that motivation. However, I've been working with activists for over 20 years, and I know that frustration and anger can be great catalysts, but you can't succeed for long if they

are your only fuel. Sooner or later they'll cause you to start making mistakes and missing opportunities. Eventually they'll undermine your effectiveness, and you'll burn out. There's a stronger, more sustainable motivation for being an active citizen.

When we ask Giraffes—the people honored by the Giraffe Heroes Project—why they stick their necks out the way they do, most will say that they were sparked into action by a crisis or problem. But it's also clear that what keeps most Giraffes going over the long haul—and what helps make them as effective as they are—transcends whatever initial frustration and anger they felt. What sustains them is a strong sense that what they're doing to solve that crisis or problem is *meaningful* to them at a profound and personal level; that is, that it's in sync with their deepest priorities and values. When asked about their motivations, many Giraffes just look at us and tell us in so many words that it's a damned-fool question. "The problem was right in front of me," they'll say. "What was I *supposed* to do?" It's almost as if they couldn't *not* do it.

And it isn't just Giraffes who are motivated by a sense of meaning. Philosophers and spiritual leaders have been telling us for millennia that there's no deeper human need and no more powerful yearning than to live a life we know is meaningful. We all want to be able to look at ourselves in the mirror and know that who we are and what we're doing *matters*, that we're not just marking time.

That's certainly true for me. I've lived a while, and my résumé is pretty full. What



A GIRAFFE STORY

Ernesto Villareal

In the small Idaho town of Marsing, football was everything. On Friday nights, hundreds of people from the town and the farms around it would come to watch the Marsing Huskies play. Ernesto "Neto" Villareal was a star player on the high school team, good enough to be considered for a college athletic scholarship.

The problem was the fans. When the players did something good, everyone cheered. But when they made a mistake, something else happened. If the player was Latino, like Villareal, some fans shouted insults like "Stupid Mexican!" It happened a lot, and people seemed not to notice. But the Latino players noticed. Villareal led them in refusing to play anymore unless the insults stopped. Their coach told them that would only make things worse—the team couldn't win the state championship if they stopped playing. Villareal also knew that he could lose his chance at a football scholarship. But stopping the insults meant more than a scholarship. Villareal talked to the student body president, who then talked to the principal. When the principal refused to do anything, the other Latino players were ready to give up and resume playing. Not Villareal. He went over the principal's head to the school board, even though he'd seen one of the school board members shouting insults at Latino players. It



I've found is that I want my actions and commitments to be part of a purpose that satisfies me deep inside and makes me feel totally alive. When I know that what I'm doing is personally meaningful—even if it's very hard—I feel an energy, a sense of excitement, a deep satisfaction of being in the right place at the right time. I'm more inspiring to others, and they are more likely to follow my lead. And I'm much more likely to get the results I want.

WHAT'S YOUR EXPERIENCE? ■ *At home, at work, or in the community, do you feel the difference when you know that what you're doing is meaningful?*

We all know people who involve themselves in activities and relationships that *don't* have meaning for them, or who avoid the search for meaning altogether by pretending that *nothing* is meaningful; they ignore their feelings of emptiness or bury them. It's hard for such people to be creative and to put much focus or energy into what they're doing. They rarely excel; often it's hard for them even to get the job done. People like these are anything but inspiring. It's as if they were slogging through wet concrete.

Finding what's meaningful to you adds focus, energy, passion, and commitment to your life, and it provides a strong, stable motivation for sticking your neck out as an active citizen.

KEY POINT ■ *The most powerful and positive motivation for getting involved as an active citizen—for creating change that serves the common good—comes from the meaning that the work has for you.*

was difficult, but Villareal told the board why he was refusing to play. "Now," he said to his teammates afterward, "they can't say nobody told them."

The student body president, inspired by Villareal's courage, wrote a letter asking football fans to stop the insults and asking officials to throw people out of the stadium if they didn't stop. Led by Villareal, the Latino players agreed to play only if the letter was read over the loudspeaker at the game.

The principal refused to read the letter, but the school superintendent overruled him and directed that the letter be read. When it was, people in the stadium stood and applauded. And the insults stopped. Neto had scored a touchdown for tolerance. Combating racism in his town meant something to Neto Villareal—and it may have been the biggest win of his career.



A GIRAFFE STORY**Andy and Vashti Hurst**

Finding and doing what makes our lives meaningful also just makes sense. We can expect to be on earth for 80 or so years. Given that finite time, how can we invest our talents, intelligence, and awareness in things we don't find meaningful enough to justify the investment? To me, that's like owning a fancy Swiss watch with no hands. Your life is important, and there's simply got to be more to it than just showing up.

I've been speaking to groups for 20 years, and there's no topic that gets people to lean forward in their seats like this one. The room becomes quiet. No coughs, no shuffling feet. People recognize the feeling and know from their own lives that there is no more important question. Even if buried, unspoken, or denied, the search for meaning drives our lives.

WHAT'S THE PATH TO A MEANINGFUL LIFE?

If meaning is that important, where does it come from and how do you get there?

At the Giraffe Heroes Project, we've written a book for high school kids, and the first thing we talk about is meaning. We know they're living in a culture that would like all of us to believe that our true worth is in what we buy. So we start by asking, "When's the last time something you *bought* made your life meaningful, or even made you feel good for very long?"

That's an important question for all of us, considering that it's adults who create the culture that tries to hook kids on stuff to buy, and we're just as hooked as they are. Maybe for us it's a fancy new car

Imagine a place about the size of Connecticut, a place that's hot and dusty in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter. It has no resources—no oil, gas, minerals, crops, or lumber. There are no theaters, nursing homes, or public transportation. A third of the houses don't have electricity or running water. Forty thousand people live in this place. Their unemployment rate is upwards of 85 percent. The infant mortality rate is 2.5 times the U.S. average, and the diabetes rate is 8 times higher. The tuberculosis rate is 10 times higher than in nearby areas. Life expectancy matches that of Haiti.

Imagine having to live there. Now imagine choosing to live there. Since 1993 Dr. Andy Hurst and his wife, Vashti, have chosen to live in this desolate place—the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, in the most prosperous country in the world, in its most prosperous time.

Although the Hursts had enjoyed life in Seattle and New York, they fell in love with the people of Pine Ridge, the Oglala Lakota (Sioux), when they spent a month there as part of Andy's residency program. Now "Doc Andy" provides medical care on the reservation, and the organization the couple founded, the National Association for American Indian Children and Elders (NAAICE), has

instead of a knock-'em-dead shirt—but when's the last time something *you* bought put meaning in your life for very long?

Well, if it's not stuff you buy that makes life meaningful, we ask the kids, then what about power and status? At 16, it may be what clique they belong to, but kids can also see older friends and family members who always seem to be headed up some ladder, looking for meaning at the next rung, or the one above that, and not finding it.

Take a look at the people you know who have power or status, we suggest. How many of *them* are leading meaningful lives? And for those who are, is it the power and status that fulfills them—or something else?

So what is a path that gets us there? This story is old, but it makes the point well:

The scene is 13th-century Paris, where construction is in progress on the cathedral of Notre Dame. An onlooker—call him the world's first management consultant—watches three people at work: two stonemasons and an old woman who sweeps up the broken pieces of stone.

The consultant asks the first stonemason what he's doing. The man says, "I'm cutting stones, and that puts meat and potatoes on the table for my family."

The consultant asks the same question of the second stonemason, who answers, "I'm making a gargoyle for the top of the west buttress."

Then the consultant asks the old woman what she's doing. She stops moving her broom and turns to look at the place in the sky where the great spires will eventually rise, decades after she is dead.



created 30 support programs. These include programs for home ownership and for renovating homes and service facilities; for building wheelchair ramps, playgrounds, vegetable gardens, and outhouses; for distributing food, clothing, fuel, furniture, school supplies, Christmas gifts, and new-baby supplies; for running a basketball camp; and for managing volunteers who come from far and wide to work on NAAICE projects.

Perhaps even more important, the Hursts have become messengers to the rest of America, sounding the alarm about the dire situation at Pine Ridge and drumming up concern and concrete aid.

"We need to reverse our history of genocide against First Nations people, to see our own human rights issues instead of just pointing the finger at other countries," says Andy Hurst. "We must help these good people."

The Hursts will tell you they've gained more than they've expended in aiding the people of Pine Ridge—they gain every time an Oglala Lakota begins living a better life.

When Vashti Hurst is asked why they persist, she says, "Why do we go on? Because *they* go on. They are people of great dignity and grace. We know that other Americans will help when they realize what a crisis this is."

Then she turns back and says, “I, sir, am helping build a great cathedral where people can be with God.”

That old woman had it right. She had found meaning for her life—not in possessions or positions, but in seeing her menial job as a commitment to a task bigger than herself and her own needs.

We get the same lesson from Giraffes. People like Ernesto Villareal, who took on school officials to combat racism in his community (see sidebar, page 8), or Andy and Vashti Hurst, who dedicated their lives to providing medical help and fighting for justice in the poorest place in America (see sidebar, page 10).

KEY POINT ■ *People who lead meaningful lives—like that old woman, like Giraffes—don’t find that meaning in possessions or positions; they find it in carrying out personal commitments to ideals bigger than themselves and their own needs. It’s this commitment that generates the personal enthusiasm, passion, and power of a meaningful life.*

That’s true for Giraffes. I think it’s true for anyone.

But there are many ideals that transcend individual needs. Some of them are negative: The Nazis found meaning in their commitment to ruling Europe. Suicide bombers give their lives for a cause. There may be enthusiasm, passion, and power in commitments like these, but their success depends on the defeat of others, who are certain to fight back. Eventually it’s a downward spiral.

KEY POINT ■ *There is a way to find meaning that is positive and lasting. And that’s to commit to ideals of service, of working for the common good. The old woman was building a place where people could be with God. Giraffes are, one and all, acting for the good of their communities and beyond.*

It took me a long time to get this lesson.

When I was a teenager and young man, the only thing that held meaning for me was adventuring. I shipped out on freighters while still in high school. I was part of a team that made the first ascent of the north wall of Mt. McKinley in Alaska, a climb so dangerous it’s never been repeated. I hitchhiked around the world. As a correspondent for *The Boston Globe* in the mid-’60s, I waded into every shooting war I could find, from Algeria to Laos. The only thing that mattered was the next adrenaline rush.

Then I joined the U.S. Foreign Service. I was a diplomat for 15 years and moved up the ladder fast. I worked not in embassies but in jungles and deserts all over the Third World. I was in the revolution in Libya in 1969, then in Vietnam for a year and a half. I'd asked for Vietnam, not because I thought the war was right or just, but because being in a war was an adventure I'd not yet had. And doing a good job in a dangerous place meant rapid promotions.

Home from the war, I became one of the fastest-rising stars in the Foreign Service. Most of my work dealt with wars and revolutions and arms sales. I saw oppression, hunger, and war all over the world; what held meaning for me, however, was not an urge to relieve the suffering, but the attraction of danger in those far-off spots and my own surging career. The most important day of the year for me was the day when the promotion list came out. When my name was on it, I went out to celebrate.

By the time I was 35, however, the motivations for what I was doing with my life began to sit in the pit of my stomach like a bad meal. *Nothing* seemed meaningful to me anymore—not in any sense that felt right or fulfilling.

CASE STUDY **At the United Nations**

In the late 1970s, my career took me to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. Part of my job there was overseeing the arms embargo on South Africa. It had been imposed because much of the military equipment sold to the South African government in those years was used to enforce apartheid.

But the embargo leaked like a sieve; there were huge amounts of money involved in the arms trade, and the arms dealers had their friends in parliaments in Europe and in our own Congress. I ignored my instructions to overlook the leaks in the embargo and instead worked secretly for months to tighten it. I did that by helping Third World countries increase their pressure against my own government.

It worked. A tougher embargo was enforced, which helped end apartheid. At any time in this process I could have been fired for insubordination or worse—and almost was.

I took those risks because of a day in South Africa that started with meetings with black activists in the squalor and oppression of the black township of Soweto, and ended with a diplomatic cocktail

party in Johannesburg's fanciest white suburb, in a mansion surrounded by wrought-iron fences and guard dogs.

Apartheid stank. From that afternoon on, helping end apartheid *meant* something to me at some far deeper place in my soul than self-centered adventures and promotions. Like Giraffes, *I couldn't not do what I did.*

The arms embargo only whetted my appetite. I quickly discovered that I could take all the skills I'd been using to play political power games and focus them instead on peace and justice issues in the Third World.

This discovery made all the difference—to the people I was helping, and to me. At the UN I'd finally found what it was that could make my life meaningful. It wasn't chasing adventure or status or power; it was working to end injustice and suffering. Being part of the efforts to end apartheid, to bring freedom to colonies in Africa and Asia, and to press for human rights pulled me to a new focus for my life. Ironically, the thrill of making a difference this way matched the thrill of any adventures I'd ever had, and it was satisfying in a way no promotion had ever been.

This story may be exotic, but the point is not. I think the path to a meaningful life is out there for each of us, but we have to find it. I tell people, especially young people, what I wish I'd been told when I was just starting out: that every one of us has and will have unique opportunities to make a difference, if only in small and quiet ways. A successful life is about spotting those opportunities and acting on them. The only mistake you can make is to ignore the quest, to settle for an ordinary life, to just look out for Number One, to grow up and live and die without ever having made a difference.

TRY THIS ■ *Take the time and the risk to ask yourself some tough questions and to reflect on the answers:*

- *Is what I'm doing with my life, including any current volunteer work, meaningful enough to me, or am I just going through the motions?*
 - *What ideals am I committed to—or might I commit to—to provide that meaning?*
 - *What more can I do to put those ideals into action?*
-

Ask yourself these questions regularly. If you're satisfied that an activity has meaning for you, keep reminding yourself that it does. Never take it for granted. Never refer to your work as a citizen activist as a "duty." Call it what it is—something that makes you fully alive.

And if introspection tells you that you are stuck in something without enough meaning for you, then commit yourself to changing that.

GOING FOR IT

Citizenship is not a spectator sport. It means more than just wishing something good might happen or cheering someone else on. It's more than turning out to vote once in a while. It means investing your time, energy, and resources to make a difference. If we fail to do this—if we consistently wait for others to solve the problems we see—then we muffle our voices, abdicate our responsibilities, and have little right to complain if things turn out badly.

There is an issue out there with your name on it, something you care about, someplace where you can serve and make a difference. Whatever it is, large or small, pay attention to it.

And if you've been energized by a single project, don't stop there. Use what you learned the first time around to help others tackle the same problem—or to take on other causes that might benefit from your experience and contacts. When the poisoning of Love Canal put her own kids in danger, Giraffe Lois Gibbs acted to stop that threat (see sidebar, page 4). But after she won at Love Canal, she started a national organization to help all communities threatened by toxic wastes.

Not long ago I went back for a reunion of the prep school in Tacoma, Washington, from which I had graduated. Nearly all my classmates were leading comfortable lives in business or the professions. They talked about portfolios and college tuitions. I was bored to death—except by one man. His name was Tom Noble. A poor student and slow of speech in high school, he'd been the butt of jokes. But for the past 30 years he'd been directing a social-services agency in the worst area of Tacoma and had just started a controversial needle-exchange program.

Tom Noble was fascinating. He spoke with the charisma and energy and peace of mind of a person who had truly found his calling and answered it with everything he had.

The poet Mary Oliver asks, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

It’s the most important question you’ll ever ask yourself.

Use your one wild and precious life to serve a cause you believe in. Get involved. The rest of this book will help you do that with courage and skill.

PLAY IT AGAIN

- *The most powerful and positive motivation for sticking your neck out as an active citizen comes from the meaning that this work has for you.*
- *People who lead meaningful lives don’t find that meaning in possessions or positions; they find it in carrying out personal commitments to ideals bigger than themselves and their own needs—especially ideals of service, of working for the common good.*
- *There is an issue out there with your name on it, something you care about, someplace where you can serve and make a difference.*
- *If you’ve been energized by a single project, don’t stop there. Use what you’ve learned the first time around to help others tackle the same problem—or to take on other causes that might benefit from your experience and contacts.*
- *Active citizenship means more than just wishing something good might happen or cheering someone else on. It means investing your own time, energy, and resources. Ignore this and you muffle your voice, abdicate your responsibilities, and weaken your right to complain if things turn out badly.*

WHAT’S NEXT?

When you’ve found the issue with your name on it, the next steps are to learn all you can about it, design a specific project, and create a vision for its success.

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A Street-Smart Guide to Creating Change in Your Community
And Beyond***

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