

Volunteer Canada is hoping to recruit boomers – just like B.C.'s dynamic CESO volunteer Susan Wetmore – to fill the shoes of aging seniors who are slowing down • **By Dennis Smith**

WANTED: volunteer boomers

Susan Wetmore has packed her bags, rolled up her sleeves and volunteered – 13 times – in remote countries like Haiti and Tajikistan.

But she's not done yet. Far from it. She's ready to board the plane again if another assignment came up.

"I'd go back to Haiti in a heartbeat," she says. "I found a real closeness with the people I worked with."

The 61-year-old is among many volunteers finding satisfaction after paid work winds down. Nearly 12.5-million Canadians volunteer, according to the 2007 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating. The survey notes volunteering rates decline with age, but older volunteers do more.

Such is the case with Wetmore, whose 13 international assignments have been with CESO (Canadian Executive Service Organization – ceso-saco.com). She also helped with its Aboriginal women's workshops in Ontario and Nova Scotia.

"It meets a lot of personal needs, like traveling, taking risks, thinking out of the box and being creative," says Wetmore, who lives on Salt Spring Island, B.C. "I love being with new people and situations, and problem solving."

Prior to her retirement, the former southwestern Ontario resident worked as a social worker, a councillor in the small town of Mount

Forest and a cable-television host in London in addition to professional experience in hotel and restaurant management. She volunteered in 2007 and 2008 in Haiti for CESO, consulting in the hospitality business.

Wetmore predicts an "uphill, uphill battle," in recovering from the devastating earthquake. She suggests razing stricken areas and starting over. But she's optimistic about Haitians. "They will pick up and get back on track."

Among her most vivid memories of Haiti, Wetmore recalls soldiers maintaining tenuous political stability, corruption, shaky electricity and infrastructure, and people living in shanties. "Poor doesn't begin to describe it," she says. "It's nothing to drive on the road and see naked kids. It's very desperate there."

Wetmore praises Canadian volunteers, noting some repeatedly return to Haiti. "There must be a magic about it, in its own warped way."

She finds that there is overwhelming poverty in most of the nations she visits and volunteers have to learn to deal with that reality. Buy she avoids imposing her morals on anyone. "My job is not to fight the war," she says. "My job is to deal with issues that can be dealt with."

Wetmore was fascinated by Tajikistan, with its Muslim culture and communal farms from the Soviet Union days. "It is so far off the beat-

(Bottom left, then below, then right) The Canadian Executive Service Organization attracts volunteers who return to repeat assignments in far-flung nations around the world. Pictured: CESO volunteer Jacynthe Deschamps worked on a microfinance program in Burkina Faso last year.

• Long-time CESO volunteer Susan Wetmore (centre) found herself in a temporary paying position in February, helping with transit at the Vancouver Olympics.

• Volunteer Canada executive Don Lapierre suggests boomers contemplating a volunteer position tend to ask: what's in it for me?

(CESO photo, Wetmore photo, Volunteer Canada photo)



en path. It was just invigorating."

Back home, she finds people don't appreciate having comfortable lives. "I come back to Canada and hear such whining."

At the recent Winter Olympics, Wetmore took on a paying job overseeing a program that ensured fans travelled safely on Vancouver Transit.

"People of my age, stage and background are a perfect fit," she says about the temporary position. "We have flexibility, stability, decision-making and common sense."

A representative for Volunteer Canada (volunteer.ca or volunteer50plus.ca) says the aging post-World War II generation will have a huge impact on the continuing search for new volunteers. "Baby boomers will change the face of volunteering, just as they've changed every other facet of life," says Don Lapierre, senior manager of programs and voluntary-sector relations.

While seniors – above 65 – currently do a tremendous amount of volunteer work, Lapierre notes that some are slowing down.

"In their 60s and 70s they're stepping down for various reasons," says Lapierre. "There's a worry about who'll fill the void when veteran volunteers step out of the picture."

He says boomers won't have the same volunteering interests as the veterans, who helped

because of a sense of duty. There's a "What's in it for me?" factor with some boomer volunteers, including retired ones, he says.

"The new volunteer wants to see the impact of whatever they've done," says Lapierre. "They want to see results."

He argues that boomers want to use their skills. "They desire a fast-food approach – go in, get out and feel good."

Lapierre says instead of front-line work, the new volunteer may want to serve on a board. Jobs will need redesigning, with paid and unpaid roles examined, he says.

"It's going to be a bit of a struggle for some organizations to make the shift," says Lapierre.

Lapierre's concern that the legion of volunteers drawn from the older crowd will start to shrink finds a face in Murray Baldwin, 84, of Burlington – though certainly not due to lack of will on Baldwin's part.

Fundraiser Baldwin chaired the Heart and Stroke Foundation's Pasta Fest in his city for 10 years, netting \$8,000 to \$9,000 annually – but health problems forced him to step down two years ago.

"My objective was to do more every year. You can't lie down on the job," he recalls. "That kept me going."

Baldwin also helped with the Big Bike Ride fundraiser, various canvassing jobs and as a Cancer Society volunteer driver.

His sales background was a fundraising asset. "I was used to getting out and talking to people."

Baldwin was asked to join the foundation in 1992, a while after retiring from sales with Taylor Steel. He liked setting his own volunteering schedule. "If you had to be out during the day, you could work at night."

Baldwin stopped his volunteering duties after being diagnosed with leukemia. But no one can ever accuse him of short-changing his community. "Sometimes I think doing volunteer work makes you feel better," he says. "You're doing something for someone else besides yourself."

National Volunteer Week 2010 is celebrated April 18-24. *FY*

