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Mission Arlington gets national fame

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Charity group is featured in news magazine's cover story

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ARLINGTON - Days before President Clinton's Summit for America's Future, also known as the volunteer summit, people across the country will have already been exposed to one such Arlington group.

Mission Arlington is featured in the just-released April 28 edition of U.S. News & World Report, where the cover story, "Is Volunteering A Waste of Time?," features comments from longtime volunteer Lee Pease.

The article begins with a headline "Do do-gooders do much good?" and goes on to question whether volunteers are solving any of the nation's core problems, such as illiteracy and drug abuse.

Pease has mixed emotions about the article.

"There was a lot in it that was really interesting," Pease said. "My concern about the article was that it had a bit of a negative slant to it."

Clinton's salute to volunteers, which is Sunday through Tuesday, is the president's way of increasing volunteerism in these days of welfare reform and dwindling government assistance.

But the article expresses doubts that volunteers are ready to fill the gap, and questions whether organizations are equipped to train and engage large influxes of volunteers.

Many of the points brought up in the article are valid, Pease said.

"It is really hard sometimes to measure outcomes in working with volunteers," said Pease, a former volunteer coordinator at Arlington Night Shelter. "Managing them efficiently and effectively is quite a challenge. Organizations are going to have to be sure they have strong volunteer programs in place to make sure that the effort being expended is going to have some end results."

Pease and Tillie Burgin, director of Mission Arlington, have no doubts that Arlington will handle any additional needs or demands.

"Looking at Arlington, I believe it can do it," Pease said. "Whether others can, that remains to be seen."

Burgin said volunteers who come to her door will be welcomed with open arms.

"We can handle all you can give us," Burgin said. "We have a volunteer base of about 2,000 people, but we could double that and still use everybody."

The article's author also believes Mission Arlington and its volunteers are capable of almost anything.

"I have to say, as a matter of comparison, the thing that impressed me about Mission Arlington is the determination on the part of volunteers to really live with and be intimately and personally involved in the lives of the people they serve, to walk beside them rather than to lecture them," said Michael J. Gerson, policy director for Sen. Dan Coats, R-Ind., and the article's author.

The piece mentions the importance of one-on-one relations between volunteers and clients, something that Mission Arlington strives for.

"They were really a fine example of what I think works in volunteering," Gerson said, adding that many organizations he studied during his weeks of nationwide research lacked this all-important individual aspect.

That level of intimacy is something Burgin strives for and tries to instill in her volunteers, although few of them need reminders.

"Some of my best volunteers have come from a crisis," Burgin said yesterday. As a light rain began to fall, a volunteer poked his head in her office and told her he was leaving to pick up and deliver some mattresses before it began raining harder. The volunteer, like about one-third of Mission Arlington's helpers, is a former client, Burgin said.

"They're going to go get those beds in the rain because they know what it's like to be without," Burgin said

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