



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## A Common Social Disease

My wife has fallen victim to a unique and probably incurable social disease. And, what's worse, I believe that I am the one responsible for her being exposed to the virus that caused it. In fact, I may have even become a carrier myself.

Actually there has never been an official description given to the ailment in the medical journals. I have coined my own term for it for purposes of describing it. The complete nomenclature is "clubitis compulsaria volunteeria." In common street language it translates into a compulsive desire to participate in any project that calls for a committee to be formed and for countless hours to be spent organizing people who work their hearts out for no pay and little glory. It's also called terminal volunteerism.

As I said, it's all my fault. I got ambitious. My occupation is firefighter. A few years ago I got the itch to move up in the rank structure. I wanted to be a Fire Chief. My wife, Marie, and I had only been married 3 months. We were still getting to know one another. She was just getting adjusted to the peculiarities of my job which includes, among other things, the need to rush off to the sound of a radio call, any hour of any day.

At the time we lived in what could be called the "city." There were lots of things for Marie to do to keep occupied as I tore off to the sounds of sirens and bells. But, when I applied for the new Fire Chief's job it meant moving to a small town. Marie had spent most of her life in the city environs. She was accustomed to having her social and entertainment needs met in a twinkling. My new job involved moving to a smaller, much smaller town. There was not only a lot less entertainment, there appeared to be a lot less of everything to do.

Marie's first reaction was to be expected. She was excited. Visions of more income, prestige, and opportunity are usually part of a promotion. However, her enthusiasm waned as soon as she got the chance to see our new town for the first time.

I'll never forget it. We drove down the main street of the town at about 6:00 p.m. The streets were almost completely deserted. The street signal at the intersection of the two main streets was on flashing yellow. Sitting there at the light I glanced sideways at her and tried to read her thoughts. She didn't disappoint me in the body language department. I could read it loud and clear, feelings of isolation, cultural deprivation and a life in exile was written all over her.

We went home and talked. I wanted it. She was willing to try it. So, I accepted the job. The first six months were a joy for me and hell for her. I had the challenges of building a new department. Each and every day provided me with a new horizon for involvement and change. For Marie, each day meant surviving until the weekend.

Unfortunately, she had not wanted to give up her job in the city. Her roots were there. She wanted something to do while I was off doing my thing.



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Each day, at the first pinking of the sky she drove nearly abandoned streets, to find a nearly empty freeway. By the time most of our small town was just getting into breakfast Marie was bumper to bumper in the frenetic pace of the city. It took me 2 minutes to get to and from work each day. It took her an hour on the easy days, longer on others. Each night she was among the last of freeway warriors to leave the asphalt ribbon. Once again she found herself on darkened and nearly empty streets. The yellow flashing light on Del Mar and El Camino almost appeared to be mocking her frustration each night.

Marie hadn't had the chance to meet anyone new in the town. She probably never would have with that kind of schedule. So, I suggested it. I told her to quit her job in the city and get involved down here. I think I even remember making some sort of remark like, "let's take the time you spend driving on the freeway and put it to some good use." Well, she quit and things have never been the same since. She joined the Junior Women's Club and became a Volunteer.

Things have never been the same since; for me, for her, the clubs she has joined or the town. For example, there has been the matter of our little role reversal. She used to be called Mrs. Chief, a title that I don't think she ever liked. Now, I'm referred to as Marie's husband, good ol' what's his name.

Don't get me wrong! If the situation were to happen all over again I'd still do it the same way, because I happen to believe that this town is a whole lot better off because of volunteerism. What I would do differently is be better prepared for the side effects of a wife getting INVOLVED in VOLUNTEERISM. I would be better informed as to the activities and events that would shape the life of a person married to the quintessential volunteer. It is a process that has both assets and liabilities, with the emphasis on assets.

What happens when the other half decides to "grow a little, get involved?" How do you cope with the fact that your spouse has a new arena to operate in, one that may or may not include you? What happens when the growing experience includes solving other people's problems, sometimes at your expense? What happens to YOU when your mate gets the volunteers disease?

Admittedly, this article is being prepared from the male point of view, because I'm the husband. It could just as simply been written from the distaff side because I've seen the disease strike both sexes. It affects Boy Scout leaders as well as Assistance Leaguers. It can just as easily affect the Rotarian as it can a member of the BPW. Volunteerism may well be the first component of a true ERA!

Let me share with you some of my knowledge in diagnosing the onset of this malady. They could make their appearance in your spouse any day now.

The first sign that is going to be a visible at the onset will actually be audible. Your phone is going to start ringing a lot more. I mean a lot more! Sort of on the magnitude of having a couple of teenagers in the house. Perhaps on the order of having a telephone answering service in your own home. And, the messages will not make a bit of sense either.



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“Tell Marie that this is Bitsy calling - Punky hasn’t finished the P’s and Q’s yet!” What the heck is a P and Q? “Mary Beth says that the froo-froo’s won’t be ready for the rap session Thursday night!” I defy anybody to find the term froo-froo anywhere in any dictionary, I don’t care what language you are talking in.

And the importance of the messages! “Please tell Marie that the Coordinators report MUST be at the Quarterly meeting!!” Sometimes the messages sounded so important that I would have sworn they were for the President of General Motors. God forbid that I should ever forget to write one down or misinterpret one of them. In the land of volunteerism the telephone is the jungle drum. Like Marshall McLuhan said once, “the medium is the message.” The telephone is not a convenience to the volunteer, it is a tool. It creates a network of commitments. Answering the phone is act that is far more significant than the act of talking.

The way I dealt with the problem was simple. I got another phone for me, and never published the number. Then, I got a great big note pad, and a bulletin board and a liberal supply of pencils - not pens - they always seem to be dried out when you are trying to scribble the message, balance a cup of coffee and hold the receiver between neck and shoulder. Most of the messages I took followed this formula. Question: Who’s calling please? Write down answer! Question: What’s your telephone number? Write down answer! Statement: Marie will call you back as soon as she gets home. End of conversation.

Notice that I didn’t “take” the message? I found that to be too dangerous. Instead I always promised that Marie would return the call. Later!

She never failed to do that either. She would return the calls religiously and talk the whole problem out, no matter how long it took. I have the phone bills to prove it. You might be thinking that I’m exaggerating about this but I’m not. I can prove that too.

Once our phone stopped working for a while. A telephone repairman came to fix it. Marie wasn’t home so our neighbor had to let him in. This story was told to me, so it’s second hand. My neighbor swears that it’s true nonetheless. According to her, the repairman disassembled the phone instrument to locate the malfunction. First he took a look at the base of the instrument. He couldn’t find a thing wrong.

Next, he took apart the handset. After taking off the two ends he was quoted, “well I’ll be darned - the listening piece in this set is almost in perfect condition, but the mouthpiece is almost completely worn out.” It’s true. He really said it.

The interruptions that this phone phenomenon brings are numerous. I don’t care how many phone jacks there are in the house I’ll guarantee that the phone will always ring when I am at least one room away. My record was 24 calls in one day. Do you know how much time it takes to climb up and down a 14-foot stepladder 24 separate times?

The second symptom of terminal volunteerism one is THE CALENDAR. A huge calendar. A calendar with esoteric names and places penciled in, scratched out and redone. This calendar is the most important document to the volunteer. Everything they know or are going to do is on it. If it were to be lost it would



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justify a full-scale search party. Spilling something on it is grounds for the silent treatment for a couple of days.

It marks committee meetings, budget sessions, rap sessions, conventions, conferences, workshops, seminars, phone messages, financial reports and every holiday that celebrates mankind, volunteerism or life in general.

Marie is so attached to hers that our friends have stopped calling her Marie Coleman and have nicknamed her Marie Calendar. There is not a single decision ever made regarding our social interaction without consulting it. And talk about long-range planning. Marie's calendar is already on a longer-range projection than the federal governments. Complete with financial and travel projections it is a study in time management that would make a lot of consultants envious.

It's a diary of sorts too. The various days are covered with names, places, telephone numbers and addresses. Scribbled up one margin and down the other are notes, comments, bits and pieces of recipes, lists of materials and doodles. If there was ever an art form to represent the volunteer in our society it has to be a whole year's calendar, montaged and framed.

The third symptom of the disease is a complete loss of all spare living space in the home. Once, for about 6 months I never saw our dining room table. Oh sure, I saw the legs and I could see the general shape of it, but I never saw the top of that table. It was either covered with programs that had to be assembled, folded or stapled or it was under a sea of committee reports. Scrapbooks were pasted together on it. Mimeographed newsletters were stacked up by the hundreds on it. Once they made a sort of "table decoration" for a party on the table - this one was almost enough to do me in.

Remember when I said that I was a firefighter? It might not be a big thing to many of you, but do you have any idea how much of a fire hazard one thousand tissue paper flowers can create? Also, women's clubs love two other things that give the firefighter apoplexy- glue and candles. Every project they do seems to star these two commodities.

Another thing about dining room projects. They can never be done by just one or two people. They have to have a committee. Usually, the group is at least 4 to 6 in number. They have to work in groups like that to make it worthwhile to make something to eat...Inasmuch as I never got to see my dining room table during that era I did appreciate the opportunity to snack from the leftovers.

A residual effect of the committee work is that a person's coffee use escalates almost exponentially. That is if the group meets in the daytime. If the group meets in the evening there is a corollary increase in the consumption of white wine. At one point in time I was seriously considering buying stock in a coffee farm in Brazil and a winery in the California foothills to recoup my expenses.

One thing I really learned to respect about the volunteer groups was the scope of their projects. It was true that some of the projects were small, sort of hobby type activities. Others were on the scale of extravagant. Marie's first was building a float for a parade. Her latest is to build a music center that rivals any capital project I've done in the department.



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That's probably symptom number four: An ever-increasing desire to create bigger and better projects. The one that I remember the most was Marie's involvement in the Bicentennial Park. First she had just "going to the committee meetings to see what's going on." Then, she was taking minutes. In less time than it took for me to figure out where she was on Tuesday nights, she was chairman, or chairperson, of the committee. One night she came home and made the big announcement.

"We are going to build a Bicentennial Park!" My reply was, "What's this we stuff?"

They got it built too. About one hundred years from now, people will open up that time capsule and speeches will be read. The year will be 2076. What I really find interesting about the project is the fact that the bronze plaque on that granite rock will probably outlast all of the so-called important structures we are building today to do today's business. I'll also bet you that the committee to open up that time capsule will be organized by a volunteer.

I can only hope that the progeny of today's volunteers realize the contributions this generation. Building that park wasn't easy. At the time the project was up for discussion the city council was quibbling over the costs. The Bicentennial Committee had made its presentation and was waiting patiently. Because of the element of time required to complete the landscaping of the park this one meeting was very important. If the council did not pass the budget the park could not be finished by the fourth of July in 1976.

Rhetoric and politics went on for hours. Budget account codes were reviewed, staff members were asked question after question and the council finally decided what is often the easiest decision. They decided not to deal with the problem. They wanted it brought back at another session. My wife's red hair matched the fire in her eyes when she told the council what she thought of their procrastination.

The Mayor, who believe it or not, was a friend, asked for a recess and followed Marie out into the parking lot to explain the reasons for the delay. Logic went out the window as Marie told him that the people that had worked so hard to see the park become a reality weren't interested in reasons, they wanted action. She punctuated the conversation with the dreams and desires of the people that worked on the project.

Ten minutes later the council convened, the subject was brought back to the table, and you guessed it. The committee got the park. If I had of tried that in a budget hearing I would have lost my shirt, my badge and possibly a portion of my anatomy.

Volunteers can get away with it. They have one thing going for them that can't be beat. Whatever they are doing they are doing for free and the results are for everybody. It's pretty hard to fight that logic.

According to a recent study in "Futurific" magazine about 60 percent of the people interviewed on the subject of leisure time stated that "people should use their free time to help others." That's the intrinsic value of the volunteer. They can perform miracles for the simplest of reasons; they don't have to do it, they want to do it! In that same article the respondents indicated that about 46 percent of the people



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felt that the most sought after leisure time activity is volunteer work. The average of the group was about 17 hours per month. Can you imagine what that totals up to nationally? What about the costs to replace that labor?

In my small town volunteers have built parks, playgrounds, developed an Ocean Festival and a Religious play. We still have a partially volunteer fire department. Citizens have worked on emergencies and they have worked on parades. They staff the Animal Shelter and they run the Senior Center. I can't imagine how we could ever do without them.

Well, as I indicated my wife has the disease, but she is not alone. There are hundreds, even thousands more just like her. I can only write about her, because I know her best. Remember when I told you of her feelings when we first got to town? A few years ago I was offered a chance to move back to a bigger city. Guess who doesn't want to leave now? True, there are volunteers in the big city, and she could always continue her involvement. But, it's here that she got the spirit.

There are little pockets of these kinds of people everywhere. In our case it's a shame that we had to make a physical move to learn the lesson that leisure and pleasure are not always centered on entertainment. Involvement in helping others help themselves is not only a rewarding experience, but it is also a growing experience.

Maybe, if you're one of the lucky ones you already have the bug. If not maybe you will get lucky in the near future and catch it. You will gain from it and more importantly so will someone else, perhaps a total stranger to you.

I've noticed that volunteerism is a chronic illness that gets progressively worse as the patient achieves more and more success. Fortunately, the disease is not fatal like the legionnaires disease. In my own case I am getting a little concerned because I have begun to detect a whole new series of symptoms that indicate that Marie is not only afflicted, but that she's infectious. Like I said I think she's made me a carrier!