

# OPINION

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# Volunteers build community

**W**e here in the Mercer County area are rich with potential volunteers.

We are better off financially and educationally than most other people in the country, and we also have more free time on our hands than the average Joe.

That snapshot was developed through the results of a Rutgers University survey, as staff writer Robert Stern reported last week in *The Times*.

Other studies, tons of them, have concluded that volunteering is not only good for the community, but also good for the volunteer. Psychologists believe helping out is the route to greater happiness. A Red Cross study suggests volunteering releases endorphins, the same chemicals associated with stress and pain relief and lower blood pressure. Volunteers, who are said to live longer, more healthy lives, gain experience, contacts, networks and a more positive self-image. The work itself is an illustration of the volunteer's values and beliefs.

So why don't these two prevailing trends create a perfect storm of volunteering?

No one seems to know for sure.

But leaders of the survey's two sponsoring organizations, the Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation, are hoping people and businesses around here ask themselves that question and also consider becoming more involved in their communities.

We'd like to offer a few thoughts:

Perhaps the relative drought of volunteers is due to the continuing

erosion of geographic, and therefore civic, identity. Small towns and villages that once stood out on the landscape have given way to continuous swaths of commerce. The never-ending and generic loop of the same franchises has masked what was once distinct about our hometowns.

Yet we seem a bit lost in the shadows of all that anonymity. It's fostered a longing for connection. That, of course, is evident in how plugged in we are to the wide world. We know more about Paris Hilton's latest foibles than we do of the achievements of the kid across the street. We're talking constantly on our cell phones, chatting for hours on the computer, and keeping tabs on the latest dancing star and singing idol.

Tragedy seems to bring out the best in us: The world can count on us in time of tsunami or earthquake. We write out a check or give a pint of blood and feel we've done our part. And those are good deeds, no doubt about it.

But volunteering is much more than responding to dramatic catastrophe. It's helping out in small yet substantive ways to knit a sense of community.

It requires a contribution of time and effort, but also the gift of our good will. That's a commodity often creaky with disuse (except for those benevolent bursts at Christmas), but giving it a workout, like any good exercise, will make it stronger.

Just as regular voluntary effort will make our communities stronger and more our own.