

## Group helps volunteers get their hands on work

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No matter how badly someone wants to put their good will to use, getting a handle on where to start is often the hardest thing to grasp. Realizing this difficulty, a group of U.S. volunteers in the late '80s got together to create New York Cares, an organization that helps link the ambitious aims of do-gooders with those in need.

"We started it because very well-intentioned people may get a phone number for a place, but do they want to call?" said Deva Hirsch, who in 1989 cofounded Hands On Atlanta — one of the first three Hands On organizations, said. "Even for me, who's used to (cold-calling), I don't know what the reaction's going to be."



Deva Hirsch, daughter Sydney and friend Christina pose for a photo on the Day of Service.

Since its inception, Hands On has grown internationally to more than 90 communities under its umbrella organization, the Hands On Network, which implements nearly 50,000 projects a year, including the construction of wheelchair ramps, food delivery to the hungry, senior citizen care and tutoring sessions for children.

Hirsch bid a temporary farewell to her life with Hands On when she moved to Tokyo with her family just over two years ago. Although she had no prior plan to do anything with Hands On here, she says it wasn't long before the stark differences between volunteering in Japan and in the U.S. made her realize how well the program could do in Tokyo.

Two major obstacles to volunteering here are the language barrier many foreigners face and the very newness of structured volunteerism in Japan, she says.

"Even though there have been organizations listed that if you call they'll help you, I've called and since I just spoke English I wasn't accepted as a volunteer," Hirsch says. "And then I met Japanese friends who would call one of the numbers, and people would act like they had no idea why they were calling."

Because volunteer work in Japan traditionally is done within families, within the community or only in a crisis situation — such as after the Kobe earthquake — places who need day-to-day help are often wary of those who offer their services, Hirsch says.

"It's not just a matter of training volunteers, it's a matter of training agencies." Agencies, she explains, must learn to recognize that "there are actually people who want to do this out of the goodness of their hearts, who are not expecting anything in return except respect and a thank-you." Hirsch says that sometimes recipients even question why volunteers approached them with an unrequested offer of free help.

Hirsch launched Hands On Tokyo last December. "We have flexible opportunities. You can volunteer once a month, once a week, whatever fits your schedule," Hirsch says. "We always have a project coordinator, so

folks will get a reminder e-mail once they sign up. They'll get a map of where to go and someone will meet them there. They're always volunteering with other people too, so it doesn't feel isolating.

"We do orientations before every project. We're going to tell you about us and we're going to tell you about the project that you've signed on to volunteer for because it's really important not to send people blindly," she says. "That makes people feel more invested in the volunteering, and also the organizations receive better-informed volunteers."

Hands On Tokyo has had no problem getting off the ground and has grown to just under 200 volunteers so far.

"No experience is necessary — you just need a good heart and a little bit of time. You can give one hour a week, one hour a month," Hirsch says. "We welcome anybody."

Sometimes an individual wants to have a meaningful experience where they feel they have a positive impact on someone's life. Other times corporations wish to donate money. Hands On organizes a variety of projects to suit all volunteers' needs.

For example, every Monday a group visits a senior citizen's home and, on Sundays, Hands On works with Special Olympics to teach mentally challenged children how to play basketball.

"People don't have to know how to play basketball to do this," Hirsch says. "You just have to be someone's buddy and understand — it's also helpful to understand differences."

Hands On Tokyo on Sept. 28 launched their first annual Day of Service, for which they planned three major projects. First, they rebuilt a playground at a hospital that also functions as a home for children who can't live with their parents.

"It was phenomenal to see," Hirsch says. "They hadn't even put the babies in swings before we finished this playground, and for some of them, it was their first time on a swing, and it was just so cute. They were so happy, it felt so good, and the volunteers at the end of the day knew they had left this behind for not just these babies but the next babies."

The same day, Hands On held a festival at a senior citizens' home. "There were stations where volunteers (would) give hand massages or paint nails, and also, for the ladies, did makeup and hair, and then took their pictures," Hirsch says. "Several of the women were crying. They had not felt beautiful in so long. It was incredibly touching."

Finally, Hands On volunteers walked along the Sumida River, handing out bananas and giving pamphlets to people who live in tents to tell them about the Saturday food program done by Second Harvest, a nonprofit food donation group.

"Those were the three projects that we can look back on and say 'Wow, you folks really made a difference, ' " she says. "But again, folks make a difference every week here."

*For those who want to either give donations or volunteer with the Sakuragawa senior home project (Mondays from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.), with Second Harvest to prepare food boxes (Thursdays from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.) or with Special Olympics for some basketball (Saturdays and Sundays from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.)*