

Volunteerism in Herndon

By Barbara Glakas

April is National Volunteer Month, and we thought we would take the opportunity to talk about some of the history of volunteerism in Herndon.

It is hard to know where to start, given the town of Herndon has such a long tradition of volunteerism. However, we will go back to 1868 when some volunteer villagers in this area - that would later become the Town of Herndon - formed a School Association. This was before Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) was established (in 1870), and before the Town of Herndon was incorporated (in 1879). The local villagers wanted a public school for their children, so volunteers got together, raised subscriptions of money, labor, and materials, and built a school house on Center Street, which they operated themselves until it was later incorporated into Fairfax County Public School system. Similarly, at about that same time, local volunteers who would form the Citizens Association of Oak Grove Colored School, created the Oak Grove School on the western edge of town.

Our town cemetery – the Chestnut Grove Cemetery – was started and maintained by a group of volunteers called the Herndon Cemetery Association. This group formed in 1881. They operated our cemetery for many decades.

The Herndon Fortnightly Club is the oldest Women's club in Virginia, dating back to 1889. What started as a book club of eleven women who gathered to read books for their own self-improvement, turned into a group of ladies who created the first lending library in Fairfax County. Through the years, those club ladies – all on a volunteer basis – ran the town's library up until the 1970s, after which it was absorbed into the Fairfax County Public library system.

Herndon's Volunteer Fire Department was created as a result of Herndon's 1917 Big Fire, which burned down half of Station and Pine Streets. The townspeople came together and formed a volunteer fire department. Every fire fighter was a volunteer, even the fire chief. There was not a paid fire chief until 1947. And when the fire department got its first fire truck in the 1920s – which was essentially a Model-T with a chemical pumper on the back – another volunteer group call the Herndon Citizen's Association conducted carnivals and other fund-raising events to raise money to pay for the fire truck. For generations, the Herndon Fire Volunteer Department's Ladies Auxiliary Group continued to raise money to pay for the department's fire equipment. The Herndon Fire Volunteer Department was like a family tradition, in which many members of Herndon families served. Herndon's volunteer Fire Department was absorbed to the Fairfax County Fire Department in the mid-1970s.

Herndon's Home and Interest Garden Club was formed in 1935. They helped beautify Herndon, promoting interest in gardens, protecting wildflowers and shrubs, encouraging civic planting and landscaping, and promoting the culture of plants and flowers amongst the town's young people. During WWI they also engaged in many activities to help service members and the wounded, such as making surgical bandages and knitting afghan blankets. This type of volunteerism was not limited to the Garden Club. Local farmers, for instance, donated a train car load of flour in 1918 to be shipped to France to help the war sufferers there. There were many organizations and individuals throughout the town who volunteered to help support the service members, and the war effort, during both WWI and WWII.

In 1944 a community cannery was built behind the old Herndon High School on Locust Street, the lot where Herndon Middle School is now located. This was established in response to WWII when there was rationing and people were encouraged to grow and can their own food through the use of home Victory Gardens. Many volunteers could be found working at the Herndon cannery.

In the late 1960s a group of resident volunteers helped save the Herndon Depot from being demolished. Those volunteers later became the Herndon Historical Society, which was incorporated in 1971. Still running on an all-volunteer basis, the Society operates our town museum, conducts tours, gives presentations, and publishes articles (like this one!) to help keep Herndon's history alive.

The organization LINK Inc. formed around 1972 to provide emergency food and financial assistance to people in need in Herndon and surrounding area. Many Herndon places of worship and individual Herndon volunteers continue to work in collaboration with LINK today. Other local charity groups and their volunteers do similar work, such as Cornerstones and Food for Neighbors.

The Herndon Festival was also started by a volunteer group in 1981, the Herndon Jaycees. Although this event was later planned by the Town of Herndon's Department of Parks and Recreation, it requires many volunteers in order to make it a successful event.

The Friday Night Live! free outdoor summer concert series is a Chamber of Commerce event, which started in 1995. Its founder was a Herndon resident. This weekly event would not be possible without its army of volunteers. About 100 volunteers are needed each week to run that event.

Our veteran's memorial - the tall granite obelisk we see on the town green - was planned by, and paid for – along with citizen donations - the Herndon's American Legion Post 184, another volunteer organization. The memorial was dedicated in 2002. The American Legion Post also conducts the town's Memorial Day and Veteran's Day observances each year, as well as other activities that assist veterans, all on a volunteer basis.

In the early 2000s a group of resident volunteers came together to form the Cultivating Community Initiative. This group was formed to help promote community spirit and town beautification. They planned and conducted many programs, such as the Yard of the Month contest, the Dress Up Herndon for the Holidays lights competition, the Good Neighbor Award, the Garden Tour, and the Holiday Homes Tour.

In 2013 the Herndon Village Network (HVN) was created by a group of Herndon volunteers. This organization was formed to help senior residents age in place. HVN's cadre of volunteer drivers give Herndon seniors free rides to doctor offices, stores, church, and other places.

And most recently, the Herndon WinterMarkt was a grassroots effort organized by – you guessed it – a group of resident Herndon volunteers. The WinterMarkt is an outdoor German/European style outdoor winter festival. Like many other large events in Herndon, the WinterMarkt also requires many volunteers.

Volunteerism is in Herndon's culture. There are so many volunteer opportunities in town, it is impossible to summarize them all. Whether Herndon residents are....

- or laying wreath at a veteran's grave with the Herndon Woman's Club,
- or tutoring a child at the Neighborhood Resource Center,
- or volunteering at the NatureFest with the Friends of Runnymede Park,
- or volunteering as an office assistant at Healthworks,
- or helping to shelve books at the Herndon Fortnightly Library,
- or coaching a local sports team,
- or running a food drive for the needy,
- or singing at Arts Herndon with the Town Square Singers,
- or whether you and your friends or family members are just picking up a little trash along the W&OD trail...

...volunteerism is the heart of Herndon, and is one of those things that makes Herndon such a special place to live. The town of Herndon has a long history of volunteerism and it has not slowed down yet.

To quote the late Danny Thomas, "Success has nothing to do with what you gain in life or accomplish for yourself. It's what you do for others."
