

# An Opinion: Five Keys for Mobilizing America

By Rich Harwood

The past few years have brought an increasingly divisive and acrimonious political atmosphere. But, it's still clear that people want to come together, people want to be a part of something larger than themselves, people want to act. The good news is people are ready to roll up their sleeves and get to work. We must tap into this energy and spirit as it can launch us forward.

Last February, I wrote about how we can get started in mobilizing people to act. As we start this new year, I wanted to return to those 5 keys:

**1. Turn outward toward the community** – the very first step for anyone interested in mobilizing America is to turn outward toward our communities. Too many volunteer, civic engagement and other well-intentioned community efforts are done with an organization-first approach – a narrow view that often starts and ends with fulfilling one's own programmatic goals, strategic plans, and metrics for community involvement. To have a fighting chance for success, we must make the community the reference point, not our individual programs.

**2. Focus on people's shared aspirations** – not the community's problems – people feel the full weight of their individual and community "problems." And yet, when asked about their aspirations, they are quick to offer an alternate view of what can be. These

aspirations don't arise through "visioning" exercises and happy talk. People must come together to define their shared aspirations, for only then can we find points of common action. Our shared aspirations are the starting point for mobilizing America.

**3. Get people doing actual work together** – people don't simply want to volunteer for an hour here and there. Instead, they're yearning for the opportunity to build deep and lasting relationships and be part of something larger – indeed, to address the sense of connection and caring that has been weakened or severed as they've hunkered down to ride out the storm. Thus, more "plug-and-play" volunteer programs won't do the trick this time; people want to roll-up their sleeves and work together – and over time. They want to do something real.

**4. Move in a common direction** – too often volunteer and community efforts are based on episodic, ad hoc activities where the emphasis is on making the individual volunteer "feel good." The focus is often scattered, all too often not directed at the public good, and as a result yield limited impact. Simply calling on people to volunteer will not help people rebuild their communities. We must create, together, in individual communities and across the country, a common sense of direction to guide what we do, and to make sure what we're doing add up to something real.

**5. Tell stories of self-trust and hope** – in many communities, the common narrative is one of decline, diminished hopes, even defeat. And yet, as positive actions occur, we can combat this ingrained narrative. But we must be careful. More business-as-usual storytelling – hyped public relations and cutesy vignettes – will only dampen people's spirits. While those stories "seem" real – people know better – and feel their reality is being manipulated. Instead, we must tell authentic stories of change, ones that reflect our trials and errors, successes and failures, and lessons learned. Let's call them civic parables. These stories, when real, help us restore our faith in one another and in our individual and collective ability to build stronger communities.

There is enormous potential to mobilize Americans today to rebuild our communities. The truth is people don't need to wait for Washington to get going. In fact, the real energy and spirit lives in our communities. So, let's start now. Let's mobilize people. Let's rebuild America.

*This article appeared in Rich Harwood's "Redeeming Hope Blog" on January 4, 2011 and was reprinted with permission.*

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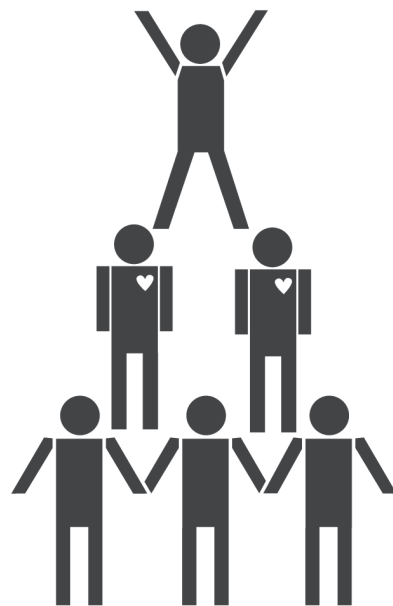
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**Throughout the holiday season many contributions were made to our community out of the generosity in the hearts of others. Vernonia Cares Food Bank would like to recognize the loved ones of our generous friends who made donations as part of our "Caring Tree" project.**

**In Memory of:**

- Dan Molling**
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**In Memory of:**

- Jane Dennis White**
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- George & Irma Johnson**
- Micky Bruers and Don Bruers**
- Irene Kerns**
- John Ricker**
- James Kopp**
- Frances Lentz**
- "Kitty Bones"**

**In Honor of:**

- Barbara Jackson**
- Vernonia Foursquare**  
**Congregation**
- Bill Langmaid**
- Patty Stacklie**

**May this New Year bring peace and health to all in our great community!**

*Happy New Year From Vernonia Cares Food Bank*