

PERSONAL VIEWPOINT

Volunteering

A healing process and training in awareness

Antigone Oreopoulou

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gradually changing opinions,
slowly eroding old barriers,
quietly building new structures.*

—John Kennedy

If you were told you that you needed to train if you wanted to be a volunteer, how would you respond?

My response was, “Why should I need training to offer my time and knowledge?”

A year ago, I came across the HELPHELLAS Volunteering Academy. Until then, my understanding of volunteering amounted to donating blood, helping animals, recycling, social solidarity, funding social projects, offering pro bono services, participating on administrative boards, and creating municipal clinics.

As a body psychotherapist, I was aware of the mounting psychological crises in Greece due to the pandemic as well as to financial and environmental crises. In July 2021, Greece once again suffered numerous fires, and in September 2021, large earthquakes. I saw first-hand a major influx of volunteers offer help – an influx that was totally uncoordinated, and which, when the fires were under control and the earthquakes behind us, soon fell apart. Additionally, and deplorably, many nonprofits and NGOs have questionable reputations in terms of how they handle money and goods.

While researching how volunteering could be better organized, I found the HELPHELLAS Volunteering Academy. I offered my services, and was assigned the role of Chief Coordinator of the Academy’s Training Program, a unique program that creates certified volunteers with common values in terms of defining volunteering, ethical codes, behavior, and attitude. This training program includes relational soft skills that are tremendously useful in all aspects of life – professional, personal, family, etc.

During my initial period as Program Coordinator, I met people from all walks of life, all sharing the common goal of making volunteering a transparent, solid institution from the people to the people. The training goal is to show that volunteerism is a way of life, independent of political parties and ideologies. It is an ancient human practice that contains and expands skills such as teamwork, leadership, self-discipline, empathy, and individual social responsibility – skills that connect and unify in order to produce results. I met people that I would never have the joy, luck, or opportunity to meet otherwise – young people, old people, active volunteers and volunteers to be, working and non-working people, professors, teachers, scientists, students, administrators, artists,

public servants, dreamers, and realists. From different parts of Greece and the world, all were motivated by a common denominator: their faith and enthusiasm, their knowledge of the importance of volunteering and its effect on society, and their willingness to train in order to improve themselves and the practice of volunteering.

Information I never imagined existed poured in: history, philosophy, law, policies on national, European, and international levels – all focused on creating practical results. My expertise grew at the speed of light. I felt like Alice in Wonderland, discovering amazing new possibilities – the most important being meeting, connecting, and bonding with generous individuals who readily offered their knowledge, time, experience, and willingness to support and help others in order to better our world. I realized that volunteerism, in a time of border violations, exemplifies the connectivity and networking that underlie the natural world. It emphasizes the interconnection between people and professions, the knowledge that results from expansion, and the effective multiplication of actions.

As our volunteering training proceeded, war broke out in Ukraine. Within a few days, Greece began taking in war refugees, mostly mothers with their children. A host of issues surfaced that required immediate solutions; in addition to the need for translators, to name only a few, housing, medical, psychological, financial, legal, and child support. Some refugees arrived at a facility close to the Academy's headquarters. In cooperation with the local municipality and the Ukrainian Women's Association in Greece, we spent hours with these women and children, registering and prioritizing their immediate needs.

Initially, I felt small and inadequate, realizing the insignificance of my personal problems. One day, for example, I was about to approach a mother and her two young children when the translator held me back. All three were staring at a tablet with tears flowing. The translator explained that they were speaking to their father, who was fighting at Harkovo, an area flattened by bombings. They did not know, day to day, if he would be alive the next day. Every night, they said their "I love you" and goodbyes, uncertain if they would ever talk again.

Etched in my heart are those days of sitting with refugee children on the garden stairs as they made drawings to teach me Ukrainian words and phrases to explain their needs. I still feel the warmth of their hugs, and see the look in their eyes in my mind's eye.

These past months, I have learned how to connect projects and be part of an effective chain. I learned how to sponsor, how to coordinate people and organizations from different countries, and how to create effective networks that coordinate projects and actions. Most importantly, I learned how to connect people from different establishments and sectors in order for projects to become viable. For example, last August, Athens coped with a dangerous raging urban fire. We asked the first-line organizations to provide our Volunteering Academy with a list of their immediate needs. Half an hour later, we received an email list of mainly pharmaceutical needs. We posted the list on social media, and sent emails to pharmaceutical companies. Immediately drugs, isotonic drinks, water, and special snacks began arriving at our headquarters. An hour later, another NGO drove the needed goods to the fire front. Simultaneously, the Volunteering Academy's social clinic was activated, and volunteer psychologists, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists were on standby. We are currently preparing support projects for the homeless, health campaigns, and trainings to help children.

So different from my individual process of a year ago...

In a short period of time, more and more people, regardless of their age, education, income, and social or political party affiliation have decided to train in volunteering in order to offer better support. Increasingly, they are coming to our headquarters, offering their time and knowledge. More universities are looking to connect with volunteer training and actions, and more companies are offering to support these actions.

I feel grateful for this life opportunity. Even though I am not an activist on the front line, in one short year, I have learned how organizing volunteering works. It is a mind and soul training that needs certified training to understand how actions can become more effective. Volunteerism has a wholistic healing effect for the volunteer, the receiver, the neighborhood, the municipality, the city, the society, and the world. It creates bonds, unifies people, builds safety, and activates mindfulness. It helps people create the society they dream of. I have learned that actions and small teams, when connected together, create amazing results. When the required skills and values are in place, inspired teams can create miracles. Finally, at my age, I now believe that training in volunteering can create change and offer hope to the generations that will follow us on this planet. Volunteerism forms and transforms responsible citizens for tomorrow.

My experience has shown me that volunteering supports the ventral vagal function. Through grounding and compassion, volunteering increases one's ability to relate and connect. Volunteer training sets in motion trauma healing mechanisms. It builds and stabilizes new neuronal pathways, and increases cognitive and empathic functions, thus enhancing both functions and creating bridges between our cortical hemispheres.



About HELPHELLAS Volunteering Academy

A unique, three-year old nonprofit organization, HELPHELLAS integrates volunteering with connection, unification, and the creation of bonds among individuals, municipalities, companies, foundations, universities, NGOs and the state. HELPHELLAS embraces all aspects of volunteerism wholistically, making sure that volunteer actions have transparency, purpose, continuity, and results – preferably with enduring outcomes.

The Volunteering Academy is a nonprofit NGO that bridges and bonds all ages, genders, and cultures via active offerings at the individual, neighborhood, municipality, city, and national level, and, finally, at the world level. Via volunteering, HELPHELLAS creates a bonding chain that multiplies the effectiveness of support and assures its long-lasting results.

HELPHELLAS engages individual social responsibility – a foundation of democracy – so every citizen understands Kennedy's words: "Peace is a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures." This purpose begins with ordinary citizens, and spreads upwards to governments, belonging to the social economy sector (the other sectors are private and public).

The Volunteering Academy projects align with the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. The Academy's goals include organizing and coordinating effective citizen responses to crises, offering backup for government actions, creating preventive and after-crisis assistance programs, and creating a common language and awareness regarding volunteering.

And the name HELPHELLAS? HELLAS means Greece. . . in Greek. It stands for supporting people via Hellenistic values, culture, philosophy, and language. Every individual, no matter where they live on the globe, can help at the level and to the degree that is possible for them.



Antigone Oreopoulou studied biology at the University of Thessaloniki, Greece, and earned her MSc in nutrition from the University of Toronto Medical School. She has an MA in Psychology from the University of Indianapolis, and a second MA in Public Relations and Communication from the American College of Greece, Communication Department. She is trained in Biosynthesis, trauma therapy, and clinical hypnosis. For decades, she has trained health and education professionals in communication, and midwives in how to connect with couples during pregnancy and birthing. She was Managing Editor of the International Body Psychotherapy Journal, has written four books, and is currently Vice President of the HELPHELLAS Volunteering Academy.

HELPHELLAS: www.helphellas.org