

Honoring the spirit of youth

More than three decades ago, the late Sen. Edward Kennedy said that the single message he could leave to the younger generation is to “lash yourself to the mast” and “escape the siren calls of complacency and indifference.”

Since that time and before, America's youth have answered this challenge, understanding the unique responsibility they hold as the world's hope. Today, youths are volunteering their time, talents and energies to make a difference in many ways — from food drives and graffiti paint-outs to organizing their own projects and nonprofit organizations that address community needs.

This spirit of youth involvement will be put on full display Friday when thousands of events in more than 100 countries will be held in celebration of Global Youth Service Day. This annual event mobilizes the millions of youths who work throughout the year to improve their communities through service.

It is also a chance to engage new participants who want to share in addressing the world's most critical issues in partnership with families, schools, community and faith-based organizations, businesses and governments.

Hugh O'Brien Youth Leadership has been promoting the idea of youth involvement and youth service for more than 50 years. To us, youths are not just the leaders of tomorrow but the possessors of both the power and promise to make a positive impact today.



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Global Youth Service Day calls attention to this promise by creating a platform for organizations to provide opportunities for youth engagement and raising awareness of the youth movement.

America's businesses can play an important role in this effort by becoming involved and, in doing so, help cultivate the next generation of leaders. Now, more than ever, it's time for businesses of all sizes to do their part by sponsoring corporate volunteer work, providing in-kind donations, speaking at youth gatherings, participating in matching gift programs and, of course, contributing financially to groups and causes that inspire students to lead a life dedicated to leadership and service.

Parents and educators can help tremendously, too, by helping youths find appropriate opportunities to become involved. They can help students think about and work through such issues as scheduling, transportation and other steps entailed in volunteering. They can also help children structure their time better and consider the amount of time they might want to commit to volunteer work so school and other obligations don't suffer.

And they can be sure to provide year-round recognition of youths as problem-solvers

and community leaders. Most important, they can be role models themselves by getting involved. After all, if the person doing the asking is a volunteer or has volunteered in the past, youths are more encouraged to climb on board.

As with all holidays and celebrations, Global Youth Services Day is a focal point for community leaders, businesses, media and policy makers to raise awareness of the youth services movement. But the real challenge lies in what happens the other 364 days a year.

Youth service is neither a one-day anomaly nor a passing fad. Instead, it is an ongoing commitment through which students find the ability to tap into their personal strengths, enhance their critical thinking, and truly understand the value and rewards of making a commitment to causes greater than themselves. In doing so, these engaged youths embark on a lifelong path of service and civic engagement. It's a path from which both they and all of society will reap tremendous rewards.

If you wonder where tomorrow's heroes will come from, a good place to start is with the young leaders of today. Friday gives us an opportunity to celebrate this spirit. The following day, the real work continues.

— Javier LaFianza is president and CEO of Westlake Village-based Hugh O'Brien Youth Leadership, a not-for-profit youth leadership development organization. Its web site is <http://www.hoby.org>.