Call goes out for volunteers

W hat a Difference a Day Makes."

For many of us, those words
are the title of a song. But now
when I think of them, I'll forever have on my
mind a wonderful initiative that's taking
place in the Chicago area.

"What a Difference a Day Makes" is the
name of a campaign that will hold volunteer
recruitment fairs at a dozen locations next
weekend. Representatives from a variety of
after-school tutor/mentor programs will be
out to recruit volunteers.

One of the different—and effective—assets
of the fairs is that prospective volunteers
will go to the fairs and interview for
the programs to find the one that fits their
individual needs. And if the programs on
hand don't suit a volunteer, that person can
look at the directory of the 300 sites for
programs throughout the Chicago area.

This is the third year for the campaign,
which is the brainchild of Daniel Bassil and
his organization, Tutor-Mentor Connection.
As in years past, Bassil is trying to bring
volunteers into the program.

Bassil has mapped out where the after-
school tutor/mentor programs are. Then, he
mapped out where different businesses, hos-
pitals, churches and social agencies are
located. By laying that map over the first, he
has pinpointed just what programs are near
these sources of volunteers.

So you say that won't work for you? Well,
Bassil has another approach. He's pinpoint-
ed programs just off exits of the expressways.
His plan: Give up one afternoon of sitting
in bumper-to-bumper traffic and spend it with
a child in need. Easy out, easy back on the
expressway, that's the plan. You'll end up at
home at just about the same time.

Bassil doesn't see the programs as simply
helping kids with schoolwork. No, he sees
the programs as taking kids "from first
grade to work."

Businesses lose $60 billion a year in
productivity and re-training for workers
who lack skills, according to Bassil. That's
why it makes sense that business be invol-
ved in the after-school programs. We
want parents to be responsible, schools to do
their jobs. Well, these children are the
future workers of America. Business has a
vested interest and needs to play a role in
getting the kids of today ready to work.

Don't let a lack of experience keep you
from volunteering. Each program offers
training. Then, throughout the year there
are city-wide get-togethers.

People tend to look at the programs as
benefitting the children alone. Wrong.
"There are tremendous benefits for the
volunteers," said Bassil, who receives com-
ments and letters regularly from volunteers
who've gained personal satisfaction as well
as practical leadership skills.

"You're on a journey. You're not going to
know the doors it's going to open up," said
Bassil, who met his wife while working with
a tutor/mentor program.

Earlier this spring, a student who'd start-
ed and stuck with tutoring/mentoring since
first grade bid farewell to Bassil. The young
man was off to Illinois Wesleyan University
on a full scholarship.

"What a difference a day makes."

Sue Ontiveros

Sue Ontiveros is a Sun-Times copy edi-
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