

Active civic involvement is essential for a successful democracy

By Bruce A. Love

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to the United States to study our young democracy. The young Frenchman met with a diverse sampling of American citizens including bankers, merchants, farmers, politicians, and others. He even met with President Andrew Jackson, and Charles Carroll of Carrollton -- the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. What de Tocqueville discovered about our successful democracy is published in his book, "Democracy in America."

One finding that impressed the Frenchman was Americans' penchant for civic associations. He felt that this civic involvement was key to our success. If you have ever witnessed any of our fine civic organizations in action, you would have to agree that these clubs are a special source of strength for this nation! The men and women who join them are the modern-day equivalents of minutemen. They are always ready when disaster strikes, or when needs arise in the community.

Two years ago, we had a desperate need for a hospital bed. As is often the case, when tragedy strikes, caring neighbors respond. One friend told me that a local branch of the Lions Club had a small inventory of wheel chairs, walkers, crutches, and hospital beds. I told her that I didn't belong to the club, so I probably couldn't qualify for any of these benefits. She assured me that membership was not a requirement. I am very grateful to the Lions club for assisting us in our time of need!

Some American civic organizations have been providing assistance to our communities, locally and globally, for many years. The Lions (est. 1917) has nearly 1.4 million members in 193 countries. According to their website, the Lions "tackle tough problems like blindness, drug abuse prevention and diabetes awareness." One of their most effective programs has been the collection and recycling of eyeglasses for distribution in developing countries. They also are involved in building parks, supporting hospitals, and many other worthwhile activities. To find a Lions chapter near you, visit www.lionsclubs.org/EN/index.shtml and click on "Club Locator."

The Rotary Club (est. 1905) is another great civic association. In a recent conversation with my Rotarian

friend, Mike Galbraith, I discovered a lot about that organization. For some reason, I had a persistent notion that Rotary was some sort of automobile club. Maybe their gear-like logo prompted that misconception. As a past President of the Roaring Spring Rotary club, Mike was able to quickly dispel my misinformed ideas. Rotarians have no secret handshakes or unusual hats (not that there is anything wrong with those practices if your group adheres to those traditions).

Mike also told me about the mission of Rotary. As stated on their website (www.rotary.org), "Rotary is a worldwide organization of business and professional leaders that provides humanitarian service, encourages high ethical standards in all vocations, and helps build goodwill and peace in the world. Approximately 1.2 million Rotarians belong to more than 31,000 Rotary clubs located in 167 countries." Mike told me Rotary likes diversity in their clubs. References to specific religious beliefs and politics are avoided in this group, though many Rotarians are (not surprisingly) also active members in their places of worship.

As a Blair County resident, I would be remiss not to mention the wonderful work done by the Shriners -- a special branch of the ancient association known as the Freemasons. Shriners are recognizable by their colorful Fez's. We see them in parades, and hosting circuses. Our landmark Jaffa Mosque was built by the Shriners. Shriners have also built many hospitals that provide free specialized medical care to children. There is some mystique surrounding this group, which has roots in medieval Europe, and boasts of past members that have included Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and many other U.S. Presidents.

There are many other highly respected civic organizations locally. No doubt I will get calls and emails from members of these clubs expressing disappointment that I did not mention their particular group. I hope I do! Let's hear from the Elks, the Moose, the Jaycees, the Kiwanis and all the others. I want to learn more about these clubs. I am ready to do my patriotic duty and join the American tradition of civic association membership, and do my part in strengthening our precious democracy!

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