

# NOT ALWAYS ABOUT MONEY

## VOLUNTEERING HELPS FILL VOID AS ECONOMY AFFECTS GIVING

BY JON OLSON

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The cozy practice of knitting and the hard-driving world of law rarely intersect. But this year, the nimble fingers of attorneys and others at Milwaukee law firm Michael Best & Friedrich made more than 300 scarves, hats and pairs of mittens for children in need of winter clothing.

"The program has really gone gangbusters," said Jennifer Rupkey, the firm's director of client development, who said the items were distributed through Cooperating Congregations of Waukesha County. "We wanted to give something in addition to the monetary donation that we make."

Money is a fine gift, of course, but at a time when money is tight, the urge to give is often finding expression through donations of time. Milwaukee-area companies of all sizes offer a variety of ways for their employees to get involved.

Shawna Muren has noticed an increase in volunteerism. Muren, who heads up the volunteer program at Northwestern Mutual in Milwaukee, said the number of employees who participated in the United Way's Days of Caring events in September increased from 200 last year to 300 in 2009.

Muren said roughly 1,000 Northwestern Mutual workers gave about 30,000 hours in volunteer time last year through the company's programs, which include a broad array of activities.

But a multibarreled approach doesn't fit every corporate culture.

At Adecco, what works is Make a Difference Day, held Nov. 7 this year. The event aims to help elderly residents prepare for winter, with volunteers raking leaves, washing windows, clearing gutters — whatever the residents need.

"We love Make a Difference Day," said Nichole Spaight-Mittelstaedt, area vice president of the staffing services firm. About half of the 50 regional headquarters employees participate, she said, along with hundreds of others from various companies.

Great weather this year brought out 930 total volunteers, said Debbie Knepe, corporate and events manager for the Volunteer Center of Milwaukee, which organized the day with Interfaith Older Adult Programs Inc. The largest corporate contributor of workers was MillerCoors, a sponsor of the event, which sent 80 people. In all, 325 homes of seniors were attended to.

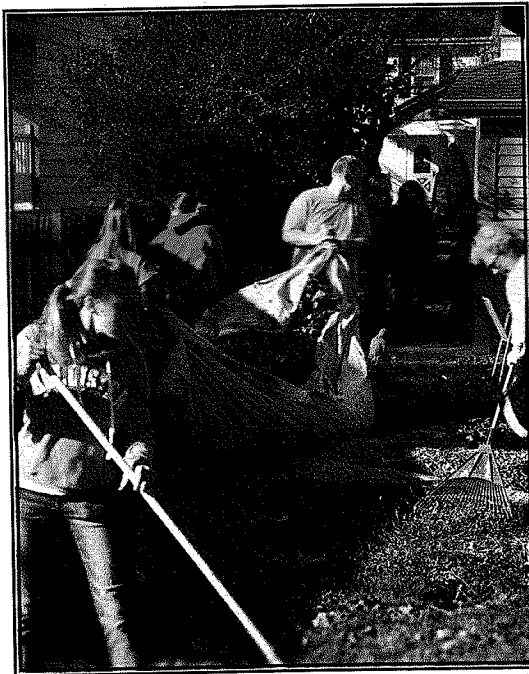
A lot of firms, like Adecco, use annual volunteer days as a way to build employee rapport by doing good works together.

"From our team-building perspective, it is one day during the year when regardless of what position you hold in the company, we're all doing the same thing to work together to help people," Spaight-Mittelstaedt said.



PATRICK XIONG

Community volunteers rake leaves at a Milwaukee-area residence as part of Make A Difference Day on Nov. 7.



About 930 volunteers helped out on Make A Difference Day.

For many firms, service on nonprofit boards is a way to help as well as a way for the nonprofits to access expertise and, in some cases, the resources of the company. For lawyers, providing expertise is not just a good idea, but a principle of the American Bar Association, said Josh Gimbel, of Michael Best & Friedrich.

The ABA's Model Rules of Professional Conduct state: "Every lawyer has a professional responsibility to provide legal services to those unable to pay. Our lawyers should aspire to render at least

50 hours of pro bono publico legal services per year."

There is no shortage of opportunities to give time. The Volunteer Center of Milwaukee, and that of Waukesha, both maintain extensive lists of organizations in need; and try to take full advantage of corporate volunteers.

"We're very much customer-centric in the fact that we work to make that connection for companies," said Michelle DuBord, manager of volunteer engagement for the Volunteer Center of Waukesha.

In addition, both centers have active business volunteer councils. The Milwaukee council consists of 46 business members, representing 60,000 employees, Knepe said.

Sharing ideas and comparing "best practices" help businesses become more effective, said Pam Brown, a member of the Milwaukee business council's steering committee and a community investment specialist at Manpower Inc., Milwaukee.

"By coming together we can be better than each of us individually," Brown said.

When it comes to helping others, most would say that the fact of giving is more important than the method.

"In this economy, you should always be giving back," said Nicole Brevitz, marketing coordinator at Boyle Fredrickson SC, a Milwaukee law firm with 36 employees. She has introduced various volunteer activities at the firm.

"We're all happy that we've got jobs and we're all happy that we're doing OK, so it's just right to give back to the community as well," she said.