



# THE Volunteer Club

HOW TO SPREAD CHEER ALL YEAR LONG.

by Jessica Press

Sure, you'd love to give your time—but you have to go to work, and take care of your kids, and who's going to walk the dog? You'd barely see your friends if you didn't have book club on the calendar! One solution: Try a volunteer club, which lets you combine good friends and your good intentions. Here's how a few groups make it work.

## SET A REGULAR SCHEDULE

For more than a year, Margie Sung, 50, has been rallying a group of friends to spend one day a month at Manhattan's New York Common Pantry, which provides food to New Yorkers in need. Her first bit of advice: Set a firm date each month, the way you would for a book club.

Giving everyone a specific schedule eliminates endless email chains. Not everybody will be able to make every meeting, of course, so it's key to avoid projects that require a specific number of people. "We're all responsible, but stuff's going to come up, and we get it," says Sung. "There's always next month."

## TAP FRIENDS WITH SIMILAR SKILLS

While working together as nail techs, Letrice Lopez, 28, Mariel Pizarro, 45, Janet Wilson, 54, and Blanca Vasquez, 49, became practically like sisters. In 2009, when their boss asked whether they wanted to volunteer with the just-launching Beauty Bus Foundation, which provides free beauty services to the terminally and chronically ill, the friends jumped at the chance. They no longer work together but still meet three times a month to volunteer for pop-up salons at hospitals in and around Los Angeles. With a little homework, you can find a charity that matches whatever expertise you and your girlfriends have—from offering legal help to training service dogs.

## BRING THE KIDS

If you can't justify paying for a sitter while you volunteer, try making the club an all-ages affair, says Sarah Kozlowski, 39. She meets monthly with ten

to 15 of her mom friends and their kids to work on projects that typically benefit underprivileged children and are easy for little hands, like putting together cookie and brownie jars to be sold for a cancer charity, or organizing diaper drives for low-income moms. "We want to make it simple for mothers to give back," says Kozlowski. "Plus, it teaches children the importance of helping others from a young age."

## CHOOSE HANDS-ON PROJECTS

Sung has found that the satisfaction of working directly with the people you're helping can keep group members motivated. "The work can be physically grueling, but when you hand a bag of food to a person—particularly a child—and see how grateful they are, it absolutely changes you," she says. Kozlowski adds that rotating projects can also help maintain enthusiasm: "If you choose different organizations, eventually everyone will get to work with a cause that's close to her heart."

## LEAVE TIME FOR WINE

As we all know, book club is about good conversation over Pinot Grigio, not just what happened in chapter 8. After your shift, make a little time to decompress and have fun, Lopez says, which will do you some good, too.

