

GUEST COLUMN

Don't tread on volunteerism

By Anne Kellogg

This month, a bill in the Ohio Legislature proposes to make it mandatory that all high school students complete 75 hours of community service before they graduate.



House Bill 209, introduced by state Rep. E.J. Thomas, R-Columbus, would allow students to choose the type of work they wish to do, provided that the school principal approves it.

This subject has drawn heated debate because it begs to define our basic duties as Americans.

In a media blitz a few years ago, the town of Harrison voted to prevent mandatory service hours as a high school graduation requirement. A group of parents, ignited by the notion that their sons and daughters needn't be forced to perform what would otherwise be acts of charitable impulse, stormed a school board meeting with the aid of T.V. cameras and microphones and stamped out the fire before it spread.

Ironically, in a rather unlikely location in this country, students have been forced to complete 40 service hours over a span of four years before graduating. And they like it.

Highland Park is an insulated bubble in what could be referred to as the buckle of the bible belt: Dallas, Texas. Its daughters are equipped with \$5,000 wardrobes and reservations at the best University of Texas sorority houses since birth.

Their male counterparts are heirs to the cattle and oil kingdoms that sprawl beyond the city's limits.

As a matter of policy, a group that might otherwise keep the rest of the city at arm's length has been forced to confront the faces that once simply stared back.

They re-emerge a bit more colorful, or at least more learned. They realize that all segments of the community are

intricately connected, as in an elaborate mosaic; that they are all in this struggle together.

The summer of my sophomore year, I worked for the Dallas Multicultural Center as a supervisor for a family of Laotian refugees. I had viewed scenes of squalor in my travels in Asia and Africa, while living as a child in Singapore, a background that lent me some perspective as I drove through the inner city.

Nonetheless, overseeing the separation of a mother and her two children from a physically abusive father was a trying experience. The reward came in helping to teach the children English and taking them on educational trips to museums and an Omnimax theater. Just as I gave them a glimpse of the world beyond the asphalt of South Oak Cliff, they gave me a deeper sense of civic duty.

The purpose of education should not only be to fill student's minds with a data bank of information, but to prepare them to be active citizens. Part of becoming wiser is developing a better sense of the community you're living in, and how you as an individual fit into the big picture.

Selfless acts of charity are noble when they come without asking. If every American acted on charitable impulses, our cities would be relieved of a great burden.

The problem lies in the fact that many choose to ignore poverty, even when it's in their own backyard. With crime rates as high as they are, suburbanites tend to recoil when they're faced with the prospect of venturing beyond their white picket fences.

In the case of the students from Highland Park, the area beyond Central Expressway is no longer alien to them. As future leaders, they will be blessed with the ability to break through boundaries.

Volunteerism isn't undermined by making community service a required part of high school education because it will never be in excess supply.

(Anne Kellogg is interning at the Journal-News this summer. A resident of suburban Dallas, she will be a senior at Miami University.)