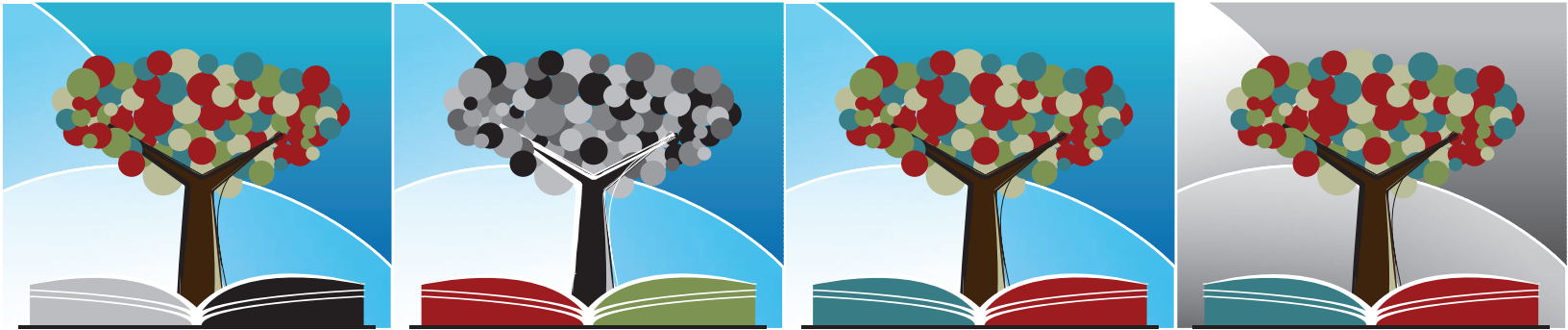


K N O W L E D G E   D E V E L O P M E N T   C E N T R E



# The Temple and the Tavern

A Case Study of Family Volunteering  
at Santropol Roulant

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Santropol Roulant

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small maple leaf icon above the letter "a".

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# The Temple and the Tavern: A Case Study of Family Volunteering at Santropol Roulant

## Introduction

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Santropol Roulant, a 12-year-old intergenerational meals-on-wheels organization located in downtown Montreal, is a thriving community space that attracts people from all walks of life to work, volunteer, and create positive change in the world. Although statistics show that Quebec has the lowest volunteer rate of all the provinces (Hall, Lasby, Gumulka, & Tryon, 2006), over 100 volunteers come through the Roulant's doors each week. Ninety percent of these volunteers are between the ages of 14 and 35. They are involved in all aspects of the organization's life. They prepare and deliver meals, grow vegetables in the rooftop garden, maintain the bike fleet, and organize fundraising events and member gatherings.

In recent years, we have noticed more and more families coming to volunteer at the Roulant. Given our long history of youth volunteerism, we found this trend intriguing. It had never occurred to us that engaging families could be a vital part of who we are as an organization, and we were excited about the potential for community-building that this presented. Nurturing families and facilitating their integration into community life is especially valuable in an urban community such as ours, where people often feel disconnected and isolated. Family volunteering can also be important to community life over the longer term; research has shown that people who take

part in a positive volunteer experience with family members when they are children are more likely to continue to contribute to their community as adults (Jalandoni, Hume, & Kirsh, 2001).

This research project represents our first attempt to actively reach out to our family volunteers. We were curious to find out why they were attracted to volunteering, what they found most engaging about their experiences, and what we could do to make volunteering more accessible and meaningful for them. Our research revealed several organizational dynamics that facilitate the engagement of family volunteers at the Roulant. We hope that the findings from our research will help other organizations working with family volunteers further develop their approach and provide direction to organizations that are just beginning to consider the idea.

In 2004, Santropol Roulant embarked on a multi-year project to mine the factors that underlie its success at volunteer engagement and to share its findings with other organizations that seek to create a strong, sustainable volunteer community. The results of this ongoing research can be found at <http://www.santropolroulant.org/2006/E-livingorg.htm> and in *The Southern Wall: The Art of Engagement at Santropol Roulant* (Nilsson, 2006).

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## What the literature tells us

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Family volunteering seems to be a relatively common, but unrecognized, phenomenon in Canada (Bowen, 2002; Lindsay, 2006; Volunteer Canada, 2003, 2004). According to Volunteer Canada, 60% of nonprofit organizations are aware that their volunteer base includes families, yet only 15% consider families when designing their volunteer programs. Due in part to this lack of attention, family volunteering tends to be informal, ad hoc (Bowen, 2002), and associated with specific events or short-term services. Not surprisingly, families with children find it particularly difficult to find voluntary organizations that are welcoming and that meet their needs (Volunteer Canada, 2004).

The good news is that there is growing interest on the part of national and regional organizations to study and actively promote family volunteering. We hope that the insights that have emerged from this research study will further inspire this trend.

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## What we set out to do

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Our study had two main objectives. They were:

1. to capture the values, attitudes, and experiences of family volunteers at Santropol Roulant; and
2. to draw out and explore the organizational factors (culture, structure, etc.) that feed family engagement and to understand the ways in which the Roulant's model of youth engagement applies to families.

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## Who we spoke to

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Over the course of five months, we spoke with a total of 35 Santropol Roulant family volunteers from 13 different families. For the purposes of our study, the term “family” refers to groups of two or more people who consider themselves to be family. The term “family volunteers” refers to family members who volunteer at the Roulant but not necessarily at the same time or in the same way. To the best of our knowledge, the participants in our study account for the majority of the Roulant’s family volunteers. The following are some of the characteristics of these volunteers:

- They ranged in age from 7 to 85.
- Their families were configured in various ways: parent/guardian and children; husband and wife; uncle and niece; and grandmother, son, grandson, and family friend.
- Some had been with the organization since its founding in 1995; others had become involved as recently as 2006. The length of involvement ranged from 6 months to 10 years.
- The frequency of volunteering ranged from once a week to a few times a year for family members who volunteered individually and a few times a month to once a year for family members who volunteered together. It was common for children as young as nine years old to volunteer alone from time to time.
- The most common kinds of activities that individual family members took part in were working in the kitchen and delivering meals. Events were the most popular for family members who volunteered together.

## How the data collection process unfolded

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The research process began with two bilingual “community conversations” in which families shared their stories and reflected on their volunteer experiences. An invitation to participate in one or both community conversations was sent to all known family volunteers and an effort was made to involve as many members of the same family as possible in each conversation.

The first conversation included 21 people from eight different families. The central guiding questions for this conversation were: *What is a family? How does it feel to be involved as a family in community life? What engages you at the Roulant?*

The second conversation involved a smaller group of 14 participants from five families, some of whom were present at the first conversation. We used the second conversation to explore in more detail the themes that had emerged in the first conversation and encouraged participants to use concrete examples to illustrate their points. We also encouraged participants to think with us about ways to make the Roulant more engaging and accessible to families.

The community conversations were followed by interviews with individual families so that we could dive more deeply into the themes that had emerged thus far and speak with families that had not been able to participate in the conversations. In total, we interviewed 11 families; eight had attended our community conversations and three had not.

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This was a participatory research project in that Santropol Roulant staff and volunteers, not external experts, guided the process. As such, our approach to data collection was strongly informed by our community-building ethos. We viewed the research process itself as a vehicle for community building and took great care to:

- **create a comfortable environment.** Group conversations were held in the centre of our office space and in our rooftop garden. Most interviews with families were held in the comfort of their own homes.
- **make the process fun.** Group conversations included some sort of fun, interactive activity, such as a treasure hunt in the rooftop garden, humorous ice-breakers, and a collective drawing exercise to visually express people's ideas. Given the intergenerational mix of the groups, we provided the younger children with paper and markers so that they could be part of the conversation without actively participating if they chose not to share their feelings verbally.
- **facilitate relationship building.** Each gathering started with a delicious meal. Once the conversation was underway, the facilitators shared their experiences and reflections on the topic so that they could be part of the process and to help create a more inviting and intimate conversational atmosphere.

## What we discovered

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It was clear from the start that families were drawn to the Roulant because of the way in which their volunteering experiences there enhanced their own relationships. Here are some of the stories that they shared with us:

- A young married couple spoke of their tradition of volunteering together on Saturdays, starting with a morning shift in the garden, followed by a trip to the bike workshop or friperie (second-hand clothing store) and then a visit with a client member with whom they maintain a balcony garden.
- A mother commented on how volunteering at the Roulant brought her family closer together while her previous volunteer commitments had had the opposite effect because they required her to be away from her family. Because she has limited time to be with her children, she does not want to volunteer unless it will allow her to spend more time with them.
- A retired husband and wife mentioned that even though they do a lot of their volunteering at the Roulant separately, volunteering at the same organization brings them together because they are able to share stories about people they both know and about experiences they have in common.



- A young woman described how it felt volunteering at the Roulant with her uncle: *“It is really nice that once or twice a week he is here and I get to see someone from my family. It’s very comforting. We have actually become closer in a way because of it. We talk more and we have certain life things in common now.”*

These examples reflect some of the effects of volunteering at the Roulant. But what were the causes? Many families highlighted how different it was volunteering at the Roulant compared to their other volunteer experiences. In the following pages, we describe the organizational dynamics that we found contribute to the meaningful engagement of family volunteers at the Roulant. These are:

- a welcoming culture;
- a safe space;
- a holistic approach to people;
- an intergenerational community;
- a flexible approach; and
- a place for personal growth.

We also include some of our own reflections on these dynamics. What follows is not meant to be a prescriptive recipe for engaging family volunteers. Rather, it is intended as food for thought and inspiration. What these ideas mean in any given organizational context is for the people living in that context to discover.

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## Organizational dynamics that appeal to family volunteers

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### A welcoming culture

*“I tell new volunteers, ‘If you are ever feeling sad or upset, go down to the Roulant and within an hour of being in the space you’ll feel great!’”* (Volunteer, age 64)

A number of family volunteers spoke of how welcome they feel at the Roulant. When describing this feeling, they talked about the openness of the physical space, the cozy decor, the personal connections they have been able to develop with the staff, and the high level of personal satisfaction the staff seem to get from their work.

*“The door is open at the Roulant. Anyone can walk in.”* (Volunteer, age 12)

Many nonprofit organizations allow the public access to their buildings or offices. What makes the Roulant’s space uniquely welcoming is that as soon as volunteers walk through the door, they find themselves amidst a sea of desks in an open office with no lobby or secretary to serve as gatekeeper and no walls to differentiate them from the staff. To be sure, from a staff perspective there is a tension that comes with this openness. Work that involves writing, reading, or thinking is often a challenge in such an open space. On the other hand, it is a fun atmosphere and contributes to a culture of learning and teamwork. After 12 years of working this way, we have found that the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages.

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*“You can hang out and sit down. It’s just like a home.” (Volunteer, age 12)*

The Roulant’s main workspace is centered around a large wooden dining table, a collection of sofas, and a bunch of mismatched chairs. It feels more like a living room than an office. More often than not, music is playing in the background and a stack of daily papers, a platter of homemade desserts, and a box of art supplies are scattered across the table. And it is truly a communal space. Volunteers and staff go there to relax, work, and socialize.

*“People remember your name when you walk in the door.” (Volunteer, age 35)*

Given the high volunteer foot traffic experienced by the Roulant – over 100 volunteers each week – the staff do their best to get to know volunteers individually. Our physical space is important in facilitating personal exchanges. The openness allows everyone, not only the volunteer coordinator, to welcome volunteers when they walk through the door. As a result, relationships between staff and volunteers tend to build quickly. Because people can hang out and talk on the couch rather than across a desk, interaction between staff and volunteers is more authentic.

*“Working at the Roulant doesn’t feel like a job to the staff. They are there because they want to be there. They love what they do. This is a very tangible thing that makes you want to come back.” (Volunteer, age 35)*

Organizations rarely make the link between the level of engagement of their staff and the level of engagement of their volunteers. At the Roulant, we treat each as equally important, recognizing that they are intimately connected. Like laughter, engagement is contagious. If staff are engaged, volunteers are more likely to be engaged.

## A safe space

*“The Roulant makes talking to strangers okay again for kids. It helps kids develop the confidence not only to talk to, but to build relationships with, people outside of their family.” (Volunteer, age 36)*

*“I wouldn’t have a problem inviting anyone from the Roulant to my home because I trust that there is a shared vision and values among the people I meet there. Also, the trust that exists at the Roulant – giving people the benefit of the doubt – enables them to feel safe and secure.” (Volunteer, age 32)*

When reflecting on what it is about the Roulant that attracts family volunteers, people often spoke of the sense of safety they felt for themselves and their family. On the surface, this appears to be an odd thing to say about a place like the Roulant. From a security perspective, the organization is anything but safe. The doors are open to anyone off the street. There is no waiting area and no receptionist to guard the gates.

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There is no formal screening of volunteers. There are no visual markers to help people differentiate between staff, volunteers, and complete strangers. And there is a constant flow of new volunteers every week who get involved in any number of ways with very little supervision. So how does an organization that is so open and that spends so little time thinking about how to create a safe environment end up feeling so safe?

Over time, we have discovered that a true sense of safety is created not through policies and procedures but through meaningful human connections. One father spoke about how comfortable he feels allowing his daughter to work independently in the kitchen chopping fruit, secure in the fact that someone is always looking after her. He does not need a policy to reassure him. At the Roulant, our intuition is that, paradoxically, the more protective policies we put in place, the less genuinely safe we will feel. So many of the organizations that we interact with daily – schools, businesses, hospitals, government agencies, other nonprofit organizations – have slowly replaced what were once vibrant webs of human relationships with policies and procedures that do not engender the same feeling of safety that comes from being part of a caring and supportive community.

From a practical perspective, this means that the organization spends a considerable amount of its energy on nurturing relationships, so much so that our mission statement now reflects this as a primary focus. We once articulated our mission as simply providing food to people living with a loss of autonomy. We now describe our food preparation and delivery work as a vehicle through which we build community.

Of course, like most voluntary organizations that work with vulnerable populations, such as seniors and children, we have created policies to address potential dangers. However, these policies are few in number and invoked only when absolutely necessary. From our conversations with families, we realized that policies often arise out of a fear-inducing event that an organization wants to ensure is never repeated. This realization inspired us to look more closely at our institutional response to such events and to explore our policy landscape more deeply. This is something other voluntary organizations might also want to do. Two questions to consider are: (1) to what extent has your organization relied on policy development when responding to security concerns, and (2) are its existing policies crafted in a way that nurtures rather than undermines community building? These are important questions to explore if you wish to create the kind of nurturing community feel that family volunteers find so welcoming.

## A holistic approach to people

*“The Roulant is like a ‘3rd place,’ similar to church, a safe space that isn’t home or work and where people can interact.”*

(Volunteer, age 36)

*“The Roulant is like a lodge or a tavern.”*

(Volunteer, age 36)

We live in a society in which there is a strong dividing line between work and play, between acts of altruism and acts of self-nurture, between the spiritual and the mundane. At the Roulant, we have often questioned this tendency to silo the human experience. Separating these intertwined aspects of ourselves seems counter-intuitive. How can an organization

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grow into a healthy, engaging community space if only parts of ourselves are welcomed and nurtured there?

The family volunteers we spoke to reinforced the importance of tending to the “whole person.” We were struck by the fact that one family likened the way they experienced the Roulant to being at a church or a temple while another compared the feeling of the Roulant to that of a tavern. One would assume that families, particularly those with children, would view these as diametrically opposed institutions. But we had families telling us that what they cherished most about their volunteer experience was that it contained elements of both. In a temple, you are encouraged to think beyond your own immediate needs and desires and to focus on others and the larger community. In a tavern, you are encouraged to live in the moment and for yourself. In a temple, ritual and history provide a safe and stable environment. In a tavern, you never know who is going to walk through the door, and every night is an adventure. The coming together of all these elements is what makes people and communities feel alive and vibrant.

## An intergenerational community

*“Ageism doesn’t exist at the Roulant, and that should be something to pass on to other organizations. It is really important that people of all ages can help each other, can pass wisdom on to each other.”*  
(Volunteer, age 54)

*“Even though I feel shy sometimes, I enjoy getting to meet people I don’t know who are different ages than me.”* (Volunteer, age 9)

Many participants in our conversations said that they appreciated the intergenerational nature of the

Roulant’s space. A mother of three talked about how she enjoys doing deliveries with her children because of the warm response she receives from elderly clients: *“Older people stop me on the street every day so that they can talk to and play with my children.”*

Another volunteer described his 85-year-old mother’s involvement at the Roulant: *“To find this world where there are all these alive, interested, vibrant 20- 30-year-olds who want to listen to my mother’s stories is a pretty rare thing, which is quite amazing!”*

Children appreciated that they were not treated any differently than adults. As one 13-year-old volunteer put it, *“I feel like an equal here, even though I’m younger; I feel listened to and respected.”* Another young volunteer spoke of how much he enjoys the responsibility he is given at the Roulant, citing his experience selling merchandise at the Roulant’s annual bazaar.

What particularly struck us was that family volunteers’ use of the term “intergenerational” was much broader than our own. Traditionally, the Roulant’s version of intergenerationalism was limited to the interaction between two distinct generations: young adult volunteers and staff and senior clients. The volunteers we spoke with emphasized the enjoyment they get from interacting with people of all ages, an experience that is largely absent from their daily routines and that they have come to realize adds richness to their lives. They pointed out that our society lacks spaces in which people from all generations can spend time together and work towards a common purpose. Most workplaces, schools, and recreational organizations engage people from a limited range of ages. The Roulant is one of the few organizations that our volunteers knew of that is helping to transcend age silos.

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Families with children seemed to experience society's age silos most intensely. Many parents expressed a feeling of isolation in their community due to the lack of "kid-friendly" common spaces. As one mother put it, *"We know some of our neighbors, but not many. Our community is limited to school, play dates, and the park."* Many parents admitted that because of this, and because most Roulant volunteers tend to be young adults, they were not sure how welcome their family would be at the Roulant.

When we asked what the Roulant could do to be more welcoming and to better accommodate families, most families immediately suggested that we increase the number of community events that we hold. They expressed how much they enjoy the annual events, such as pumpkin carving night, the Roulant's birthday party, and the summer street bazaar, and stressed that these events have become family traditions that the children look forward to each year. They are fun; they give families an opportunity to meet each other; and they give kids a chance to play and volunteer together. Here are some of the other ideas that they suggested:

- Put a sign in the window that says, "Calling all families!"
- Organize a special "family night" or "kids' night."
- Place a toy box in the office.
- Incorporate more activities for children into events.
- Make a more conscious effort to attract younger children to volunteer (e.g., do outreach to schools and organizations that work with children).
- Have evening kitchen shifts to better accommodate families' schedules.
- Expand the number of family-friendly activities (e.g., sharing the responsibility of watering a local garden is simple and can be done whenever families have the time).

After reflecting on these suggestions, it occurred to us that one of them, organizing a special "family night" or "kids' night," may have the unintentional consequence of contributing to the very isolation families with children are seeking to break out of. The more we segregate them, the more we undermine our ability to be truly intergenerational. As already mentioned, this is one of the aspects of the Roulant that families find most engaging. According to one 17-year-old we spoke to, who has been involved at the Roulant since the age of nine, *"What the Roulant does best is that they don't search out a certain type of person. They don't search out families. Nobody ever said they wanted families at the Roulant...they said they wanted people and with people came families."*

## A flexible approach

Many family volunteers spoke about how much they appreciate the unusual degree of flexibility at the Roulant and emphasized how much it has influenced their involvement. Their reflections on the subject fell naturally into three categories.

- **The what:** The diverse menu of volunteer activities and tasks at the Roulant makes it possible for family members to spend time together while still having the space to explore their own interests. For example, one volunteer spends most of his time in the rooftop garden with his wife but also enjoys doing deliveries for the meals-on-wheels service on his own. Another volunteer, who spends a lot of time in the kitchen with his daughter, described how nice it was that he could do the baking while she chopped fruit salad with other volunteers: *"She and I can do our own thing in the kitchen...we're together, but not."*

- **The when:** The fact that the Roulant is so flexible in its time requirements is something that families, particularly those with children, found very appealing. Time is one of the biggest challenges that families with children face when looking to get involved in their community. Often both parents work, making it difficult to commit to a weekly volunteer shift unless it is in the evening or on the weekend. With the meals-on-wheels service running 9:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., six days a week, there are many shifts to choose from. Families especially appreciated the fact that they can come in on Saturdays. One mother mentioned how doing a delivery shift on the weekend is a great activity for the entire family. It is easy, does not require planning or money, and enables them to share something meaningful and fun together. This comment sheds further light on why the rate of family attendance at events, such as the annual street bazaar, is much higher than the rate of family volunteering for regular volunteer shifts.

- **The how:** Family volunteers also expressed an appreciation for the Roulant’s flexibility when it comes to how things are done. People are given the freedom to approach a task in the way that makes sense to them. As one father put it, *“Parents know that they can bring their kids and not worry about whether they are going to do it the ‘right’ way. Different ways of doing things add to the end product rather than detract from it.”* Another volunteer echoed his point: *“If there is only one way of doing something, it limits how many people can get involved and closes off possibilities for different skills and talents to be shared.”*

## A place for personal growth

*“Volunteering with my children at the Roulant provides many teachable moments. My son asks a lot of questions. Kids his age are curious about age and mortality.”*  
(Volunteer, age 36)

Many of the volunteers we spoke to pointed out that they learn things at the Roulant that they would rarely learn at home, school, or work – powerful life lessons and skills gained through relationships that span generational, family, and class boundaries. One volunteer mentioned how the experience of being in touch with elderly people helped her *“connect to the circle of life and to appreciate that getting old is part of being human.”* Another spoke of how her vision of family has *“been expanded from the nuclear family to the human family.”* A father of three observed that volunteering has helped his daughters learn the importance of cooperation and giving in a community.

Similarly, when families spoke of the skills they acquired, they put very little emphasis on the obvious tasks one would learn at a meals-on-wheels organization, such as cooking, gardening, or map reading. Instead, relational skills were most valued. One mother spoke of the impact that volunteering at the Roulant has had on her daughter’s ability to empathize with people of different backgrounds. Another mother noticed that her kids were inspired to get more involved in school life.

Discovering that such personally transformative learning experiences are key to the engagement of family volunteers got us thinking more deeply about what we do to cultivate this type of learning. Three elements emerged. The first is the importance

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of striking a balance between the “being” and the “doing.” At the Roulant, how we get the work done is just as essential as the work itself. Cooking and delivering 90 meals a day, six days a week, is vitally important, but equally important is that it be done in a meaningful way – in a way that nurtures human connection and personal development for everyone involved. One young man told the following story that illustrates the concept beautifully:

*“I remember a time when I showed up to help out with the rooftop garden and Benji (the horticulturalist) asked me what I wanted to do. I remember thinking that I would be interested in making some growing containers, but I never used power tools before. Benji suggested that I work on a prototype and then gave me some tools saying, ‘Do what inspires you!’ I’m sure that he knew several ways to make the containers, but he enabled me and a few other volunteers to take on the project ourselves and explore our own possibilities. This was a very empowering experience because I was able to do something that I had never tried before.”*

His wife pointed to a piece of wooden furniture and smiled: *“It inspired him to continue to try his hand at bricolage in our own home.”*

Too often, organizations view personal growth as tangential to what they consider to be their core mission and valuable only insofar as it furthers the organization’s ability to be effective and efficient. Truly engaging voluntary organizations realize that creating

a fertile learning space for their volunteers is part of their core mission.

The second element of the Roulant’s culture that encourages learning is diversity. The organization brings together a wide range of people from various walks of life, of different ages, from different cultures and countries of origin, and who speak different languages. This is important because a fundamental way we create new meaning for ourselves is by having our perspective encounter other perspectives and by having our world opened up by seeing it through other eyes. The more diverse an organization is, the greater the opportunities for meaning-centered learning. That said, we are not suggesting that organizations increase diversity simply to promote learning; the interest in diversity must be an authentic one, based on the desire to cultivate real connections. The idea of inclusion and invitation is something we are looking to further explore so that people from diverse backgrounds feel more welcome at the Roulant.

The third element is the absence of an organizationally mandated political stance. One mother mentioned that she finds the Roulant particularly attractive because it practices a quieter, more “peaceful activism” and added that activism without anger encourages children to be involved in social change. At the Roulant, our focus is on *living* our politics. Instead of focusing on what we are against, we are building the community we want to participate in, a community that grows out of the engagement and contribution of its members.

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## Conclusions

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*“The Roulant is a part of the community families want to live in.”* (Volunteer, age 36)

This statement perfectly captures what we found to be at the heart of why families come to the Roulant. They are drawn because it feels like an extension of their community, an organization that they can *live in* rather than simply *volunteer for*. Too often organizations get caught up in delivering a service or addressing an issue and lose sight of the fact that they themselves are living, breathing communities.

Does a commitment to cultivating community within an organization interfere with productivity? In our experience, no. It might feel that way in the short-term, but we have found that the more we focus on nourishing the human spirit, the deeper and broader our long-term impact. The Roulant has not chosen engagement over productivity; rather, it has changed the definition of productivity to include caring for people and building relationships.

The organizational dynamics identified through our research are essentially rooted in this desire to move away from “organization” and towards community. In truth, families and organizations have little to do with each other. A family is not a unit of work; it is a unit of relationship. To draw upon the wellspring of love, creativity, and growth at the heart of any healthy family, organizations have to become less like machines and more like vibrant dwellings.

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# NOTES

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