

SPECIAL GUEST COLUMN BY
 GEN. COLIN L. POWELL
 (USA RET)

Paying our “Debt of Service”

THOMAS JEFFERSON ONCE SAID, “THERE IS A DEBT of service due from every man to his country, proportioned to the boundaries which nature and fortune have measured to him.” To put it another way, we can not have a decent, democratic, and healthy society unless we all do our part to make it so.

I can think of no better place to begin than with the young. First, by taking better care of the younger members of our society; and second, by making them aware, as early as possible, that serving others is good for them and good for the neighborhood, the country, and the world in which they live.

When we lose our sense of responsibility for others, the most vulnerable members of society are the first to suffer. Frequently, children suffer most of all. In my travels throughout the country, visiting inner-city neighborhoods and talking to the kids I have met there, I have been struck again and again by the stark differences between their childhoods and my own. When I was growing up in the South Bronx, I wasn't rich, at least not in a material sense, but I had the matchless blessing of being reared by two devoted parents – backed up by a platoon of doting aunts and uncles – who gave me the love, discipline, and motivation I needed to be successful as an adult. And there were other caring adults in my life: teachers, clergy, mentors – and Scout leaders – who helped me as well.

Too many of today's youngsters are not getting the same kind of careful nurturing in their formative years that I and most Americans once took for granted. Too many young people are being lost to child abuse, drug addiction, street violence, and other social pathologies of our day. Too many are having children while they are yet children themselves. Too many are dropping out of school or are not getting the quality education they need to get good jobs when they graduate. Too many are growing up unequipped for any kind of life other than dependency or crime. Some are in danger of never growing up at all. If we are going to have a civil and caring society in this country, we must start by reclaiming the young people who are most at risk.

It was with that goal in mind that the Presidents' Summit for America's Future was

convened in Philadelphia, 18 months ago in April. For three days, some of nation's most prominent leaders – including 30 state governors, a hundred mayors, and scores of business executives, government officials, heads of volunteer organizations, and other community activists, joined together in a commitment to youth endorsed by every living President of the United States and First Lady. The result was America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth.

America's Promise is a national campaign, chaired by me, whose mission is to provide at least two million youngsters by the end of the year 2000 with the five basic resources they need to grow up into strong, capable, and contributing members of society. These five resources are:

1. An ongoing relationship with a caring adult;
2. Safe places and structured activities during nonschool hours to learn and grow;
3. A healthy start and a healthy future;
4. A marketable skill through effective education; and
5. An opportunity to give back through community service.

If you think about it, these five practical, coherent, and mutually-reinforcing resources are not a bad basis on which to reconstitute our civil society. We may not be able to provide America's disadvantaged youngsters with ideal childhoods, but we can provide them with the minimum requirements they need to become decent, self-supporting adults. By doing that we can correspondingly reduce crime, drug addiction, pregnancy, dropping out, and other grim statistics among American youth. By working together toward this end, we can recover our sense of being a nation of caring neighbors. We can lay the groundwork for a better America to come as these young people grow up.

States and communities nationwide are joining with us to become “States of Promise” and “Communities of Promise.” Corporations, nonprofits, faith communities, service clubs, and individual volunteers are also making commitments to help provide needy youngsters with the five basic resources.

But one of the most heartening signs I've seen so far is the eagerness shown by so many young people themselves to give back through community service. We had youth delegates at the Summit in Philadelphia, and we work with young volunteers all the time. The Boy Scouts of America is one of our major commitment-makers.

There is nothing surprising about that. For the better part of this century, the Boy Scout



movement has been putting caring adults in the lives of young men in the form of Scout leaders. It has sponsored healthy outdoor activities. It has given inquiring young minds the chance to discover new interests, explore possible careers, and develop useful skills. Finally, through the Scout Oath to “help other people at all times” and the slogan, “Do a Good Turn Daily,” the Boy Scout movement has made service to others an integral part of the character of millions of our sons through generation after generation.

The response of the Boy Scouts of America to America's Promise is everything we might have expected, and more. The BSA and each autonomous local council will commit each of the organization's 4.4 million young people to provide an hour of service per month for each of the next four years – for a total commitment of 200 million hours. Cubs, Scouts, and Explorers will take part in a wide variety of community service activities, ranging from park clean-ups, to volunteering at local hospitals, to fire prevention, to visiting the sick and elderly, to a whole host of other useful projects. Scouts who fulfill their community service requirement will be entitled to wear a “Service to America” patch on their uniforms awarded by their local councils.



Young or old, we all need to “pay our debt of service” as Mr. Jefferson said, and Scouting's adult volunteers, who will supervise these activities, will be part of this effort as well. But when young people give back, they often gain the most from the experience. Giving back enriches their lives, helps them to develop their individual talents and leadership skills and, ultimately, makes them a better, more useful, and more productive adult citizens. America's Promise gratefully acknowledges the commitment of the Boy Scouts of America.

General Powell is chairman of America's Promise– The Alliance for Youth. A Boy Scout in his own youth, General Powell was last year presented with the Good Scout Award by the Alamo Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America in San Antonio, Texas.

