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Helping others could be a cure to post-grad loneliness

BY RENEE YASEEN
THE WASHINGTON POST

I grew up in a tightknit neighborhood in Lacrosse, Wis., where it seemed as if there was always a knock on our door. Multiple times a day, neighbors would ask to borrow cups of milk, eggs, bikes, a spare mattress — anything.

They would often bring unexpected gifts, too: flowers, toys, soups, casseroles, invitations to come outside and play for an afternoon. We shared food, crafts, art and help — all without the expectation of being repaid.

As I grew older, I realized those “just thinking of you” exchanges were more than transfers of goods — they allowed us ample time to talk and get to know each other.

These days, when I hear the doorbell ring, I sometimes don’t get up because it’s probably just Amazon.

“Service” and “volunteering” feel too formal to describe my neighbors’ warmth and compassion. But as I’ve been thinking about ways recent graduates can break down social barriers in their communities, make more friends and feel less alone, helping out — formally or informally — seems like the right idea.

Friendship-by-giving is a different approach to building community than we had in college, where our relationships were mostly with similarly aged peers and predicated on shared campus activities, dorms or student organizations.

But in young adulthood, service organizations can be diverse community centers where you can have conversations, meet new people and strengthen bonds with people you already know. Having some shared task or goal to work on with your hands — preparing food, or shoveling soil for a community garden, for example — can help conversation run more smoothly.

Volunteering in formal community service organizations is also likely to help you build connections with those who are different from you socioeconomically, demographically or culturally — which is what sociologists call “bridging social capital.” This happens because service organizations bring together diverse groups of volunteers who all want to support the same cause. Bridging social capital enables different networks to overlap in ways that increase mutual tolerance, acceptance and knowledge-sharing between groups.

“Bridging” has been one of the most meaningful aspects of Lucie Kneip’s volunteer experience. She’s a 22-year-old recent graduate and volunteer for the American Wild Horse Campaign who works alongside artists, conservationists, photographers and legislative advocates who share her enthusiasm for animals and wildlife protection. Kneip said she feels close to her fellow volunteers not despite their differences but because of them.

“No one is here because of chance or proximity but because they love horses

and sought out a way to help them,” she said.

Service also helps develop empathy and understanding between those offering and receiving support. Dora Leonardo, 23, has worked with several nonprofits to help house and support single pregnant mothers. While volunteering in her hometown of Phoenix during her summers off from college, she met women her age who had experienced teen pregnancy, abuse and sex trafficking.

Initially, Leonardo noted, each party might have made unfair assumptions about the other. “There’s definitely a difference when you share your own story versus when they share theirs,” she said.

But in deeper conversations with the women — about faith, spirituality, their deepest struggles and pain points — she discovered how much they had in common. At that level of connection, she said, “everything seems very similar.”

When choosing where to focus your efforts, there’s no need to travel too far from home. Doing volunteer work can help you spend more quality time with those with whom you already share space, interests, relationships or identity characteristics. This builds more of what sociologists call “bonding social capital.” Investing in bonding social capital can help reduce feelings of loneliness and strengthen existing relationships.

Recent-grad Rosie Dunn spent the past six months at Able Youth, volunteering to help kids in wheelchairs play adaptive sports. The nonprofit’s mission is close to her heart — Dunn is a wheelchair user and an alum of the program. As an adult volunteer, Dunn was able to inspire and relate to the young wheelchair users she works with. She also formed mutually fulfilling friendships with her fellow volunteers, many of whom share her aspirations toward a career in occupational therapy.

But even if you don’t have a similar personal connection to a service organization, just working together with others to support a cause can foster healthy friendships. Studies suggest that when we work in teams toward a shared goal, we build trust and reduce conflict more effectively than we do merely by being in the same place as other people. The combination of presence, teamwork and expression of our values makes volunteering a uniquely good way to make friends.

Voluntary service is so often introduced to us as mandatory — as a requirement for entry into honor societies, clubs and even college. But my neighbors in Lacrosse remind me of what service can be like when we don’t count the hours.

For recent grads seeking connection: the best “third spaces” in your community will be places where you have something to offer: your time, a skill, the proverbial “cup of sugar” or simply a listening ear and a smile.



Peek inside America’s largest privately owned company

BY JAVIER BLAS
BLOOMBERG OPINION

They’re one of America’s richest but least known corporate dynasties: the Cargill-MacMillan family. The source of their billions, the commodity trading giant Cargill, is the largest privately held company in the U.S. by revenue. Quietly, both the company and its owners are enjoying some of their best times ever.

That’s rather counterintuitive. Pandemics, wars, inflation and geopolitical chaos don’t typically make for a good business backdrop. But it’s precisely the treacherous conditions of 2020 to 2023, including supply-chain mayhem and wild price gyrations, that are driving the profitability of the commodity trading industry.

Keeping track of all the money isn’t straightforward: Cargill, which was founded in 1865 in Iowa but is today headquartered in a suburb of Minneapolis, eschews publicity. It decided a few years ago to stop releasing annual financial statements. Bloomberg Opinion has managed to take a look via a copy of its fiscal year 2023 accounts. What emerges is a world of riches, where the money is big and easy.

Granted, profits dropped sequentially from the previous year. But the picture that appears from the annual accounts is of a

resilient business that’s able to structurally make more money while still subject to the ups and downs of the commodity cycle.

In total, Cargill reported net income of \$3.81 billion in its fiscal year to the end of May, down from a record high of \$6.68 billion a year earlier. Still, the 2023 fiscal year is the fourth-best ever for the company. Much of the drop in profits came from its so-called “protein” business, which includes beef processing. Its “origination and processing” segment, which includes commodity trading, did rather well. Cargill declined to comment.

Looking in aggregate at the 2020-to-2023 period makes for more interesting reading. Cargill, controlled by two billionaire families linked by marriage, has been a lucrative cash machine. Over this four-year interval, the company has reported profits of about \$18.5 billion, nearly as much as it made in the entire decades of the 1990s and 2000s combined.

The chaotic markets of the last four years have helped, even if the meat business has recently weakened. But above all it’s the strong distribution footprint of Cargill — the likes of McDonald’s and Coca-Cola are clients — and its geographical diversification that are key to its success. So is the

corporate restructuring of recent years, in which Cargill dropped unprofitable businesses and expanded heavily into meat and fish.

With some 155,000 employees across 70 countries, Cargill is the “C” in the vaunted “ABCD” of the agricultural commodity trading industry. The other members of that storied club are Archer-Daniels-Midland, Bunge and Louis Dreyfus. This quartet has jointly dominated grain trading for more than a century.

If Cargill was a publicly listed company, it would be among the largest in corporate America. Based on the price-to-earnings multiples of its publicly listed rivals, Cargill could be valued at about \$50 billion to \$75 billion, if not more.

The company seems to agree with such a figure. In its annual report, Cargill puts the fair value on its stock at \$87.07 per share. Multiply that by the number of shares, and one gets to a valuation of just north of \$61.5 billion. Still, that’s down from a fair value of \$97.06 per share in 2022, according to Cargill.

The company’s strong financial performance — including declaring more than \$900 million in dividends in 2023 — may put to rest perennial gossip about whether the Cargill-MacMillans will take the company public. For

now, the two families, which count at least 14 relatives as billionaires, have resisted the temptation of an initial public offering and of following rivals Bunge, which went public in New York in 2001, and Glencore, which sold shares a decade later in London.

Cargill earlier this year appointed its tenth chief executive officer in its 158-year history.

As the CEO baton passed from Dave MacLennan to Brian Sikes in January, many in the industry asked if the latter would be the one to take Cargill public. The company has remained adamant there’s no appetite to take the step. MacLennan, who’s now chairman of the board, earlier this year reiterated it in strong terms: “Family shareholders are committed to private ownership,” he said. “There’s no reason that’s going to change in the near future.”

As long as Sikes, the current boss, maintains the days of big and easy money, he’s likely to have the support to continue making billions and keeping it all private. Why wouldn’t the company and its wealthy shareholders prefer to remain in the shadows? For Cargill, the current business model has worked for a century and a half already. If it ain’t broke, no need to fix it.

GOP must return to being party of family values

The Republican Party, the party that for years has styled itself as the party of “family values” and “traditional marriage” has lost all credibility on these issues.

Not only do polls show a huge majority of Republicans supporting the thrice-married, serial adulterer Donald Trump, but now three Republican women have joined the political orgy.

In 2011, I was in Rapid City, South Dakota, speaking at a gathering of conservatives. Gov. Kristi Noem headlined the event. She walked out on stage holding her husband’s hand and spoke openly about her Christian faith and commitment to conservative economic and social issues. In an interview with me she reinforced those beliefs.

According to The Daily Mail and New York Post, it was all a sham, because at the time, and for several years before, she and former Trump aide Corey Lewandowski had been carrying on an extramarital affair. Various sources are quoted, though not by name, as saying Noem made use of private planes to get to speaking engagements, many outside South Dakota, which reportedly involved frequent liaisons with Lewandowski. It is also claimed she ordered her staff not to share her schedule with her husband.

Asked about this, Noem’s press secretary, Ian Fury, emailed me: “the article falsely claims that the governor did not deny the allegation. I denied it on her behalf, and I have

asked the Daily Mail to correct that lie.”

When I asked about the claims alleging her infidelity, I received no reply.

Next up we have Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-CO.), age 36, and the mother of four young sons. A security video shows her attending a performance in Denver of the musical “Beetlejuice” with her “date,” 46-year-old Quinn Gallagher, a Democrat who owns a bar in Aspen. The video shows Gallagher

fondling Boebert’s breasts. She grabs his hand to keep it there before reaching over and rubbing his crotch. Boebert blames her behavior on an ongoing divorce from her husband. The video also shows Boebert vaping. She denied it, but the video doesn’t lie.

Ushers escorted Boebert and Gallagher out of the theater, but before she left, Boebert, a sitting member of Congress, flipped the ushers the middle finger.

Then there is Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC), who told a prayer breakfast in July she had to deny her “fiance” sex that morning or she would have been late for the event. After some criticism, Mace said she was a “sinner not a saint.” This is self-justification, not repentance.

In the spirit of diversity, equity and inclusion a runner-up award goes to Susanna Gibson, who is running as a Democrat for the Virginia House of Delegates. In a unique fundraising effort, Gibson livestreamed a video of her and her husband on



CAL THOMAS
TRIBUNE MEDIA SERVICES

Chaturbate, asking viewers to pay them money to watch them have sex. Maybe this is not such a problem, seeing as Democrats are more free-wielding, supporting issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, transgender rights, etc., and not conservative family values.

Back to the Republicans. Some who support Donald Trump for president (again) have written to me with the false moral claim that King David of Israel committed adultery with Bathsheba and God used him anyway. The difference is that David, according to the Scriptures in which Christians say they believe, repented and wrote one of the great Psalms that says to God: “Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight.” (Psalm 51:4).

David also paid a terrible price in the death of the son he had with Bathsheba, whose husband, Uriah, he sent to the front lines in order to have him killed in an attempt to cover up her pregnancy.

No one has heard anything approaching David’s repentance from Trump, Mace or Boebert. It is not judging to hold them accountable to the standard they claim to profess.

Republicans who support these elected representatives and Donald Trump, excusing their behavior, have made a Faustian bargain. They are ignoring the moral code they claim to endorse in order to secure temporal political power.

This is idolatry of the worst sort and reduces the party’s claim to support family values to the level of a bad joke.