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## Off-duty professional

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# The Off-Duty Professional

As he drove toward the auditorium in downtown Detroit, he felt somewhat uneasy, increasingly out-of-place. What kind of reception would he receive from the people waiting inside? He decided to park his car a block away, perhaps hoping to leave his white, middle-class accountant's image down the block as well.

The uncertainty grew worse, remembers Touche Ross manager Ronald Maday of his experience conducting a seminar for minority businessmen. When he stepped out of his car, he recalls, he groaned over his choice of a three-piece plaid suit. Off came the tie, off came the jacket, and then the vest. And when Ron Maday finally unbuttoned his collar, he loosened a familiar accounting tradition as well.

*In Detroit, left, Ron Maday heads for seminar given to inner city businessmen; in Denver, above, Joe Streater observes ceramic work by Jean Spear, who opened a new business with the help of his accounting and organizational advice.*

*"I would hear about bank statements, financial projections, or what-have-you, and my mind just went blank. But I thought the time was right to make the jump to the business world, and the Small Business Administration referred an accountant with the right answers."*

—JEAN SPEAR, GREENS 'N THINGS, DENVER

Traditionally, the accounting profession has guarded its impartiality by advising the accountant to keep the facts and figures close at hand, the issues and people at arm's length. Today, however, professional accountants like Ron Maday are challenging these old habits. They are exploring new fields of experience which demand involvement and commitment as well as the objectivity in which they have been trained. Strictly on a volunteer basis, more and more men and women have been offering one-on-one assistance to owners of small businesses, to non-profit organizations, and to training programs for disadvantaged members of society.

Indeed, the professional men and women contacted by TEMPO acknowledged a responsibility of the accounting profession, as well as their own personal commitment, to help society cope with its enormous needs. The organizations through which these volunteers channel their work are themselves representative of the variety of commitment that exists within the public accounting profession. These public interest groups include national and local organizations of the National Association of Accountants, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, and the National Association of Accountants for the Public Interest, as well as local accounting aid societies. Often, through the people involved, their activities overlap.

Supervisor Joe Streater from the firm's Denver office has just such a branching interest in two volunteer groups. Streater has been active in

many of the NAA's Socio-Economic Committee programs, serving as a director and working on the Business Counseling Task Force. It was here that he first developed a taste for the one-to-one assistance which the NAA committee offers to a variety of small businessmen and non-profit organizations.

Intermittently sipping coffee from an unusual ceramic mug, Streater unconsciously focused his attention on this object while ordering his thoughts. Suddenly he laughed, singled out the mug, and explained:

"This is a perfect example of the kind of thing we do," he said. "The Small Business Administration referred to us a woman who was seeking help to start her own ceramics business. I went over the whole operation with her—the transition from hobby to business, the cost of getting started, buying materials, expanding, applying for a bank loan. A lot of it was fundamental concepts, like figuring out how to break even, handling bookkeeping and financial projections."

After planning everything with Streater, Mrs. Jean Spear got her loan at the bank and got her business, Greens 'n Things, started. Streater received his mug and Jean's thanks.

Joe Streater has also backed the formation of a Denver affiliate of the National Association of Accountants for the Public Interest (NAAPI). Founded in San Francisco in 1972,

*Jean Spear, left, finishes a church in her ceramics workshop. Above, handicapped citizens earn income in mailing operation and in making laundry bags and sewing kits at Adams Work and Evaluation Center in Denver.*

*"I have complete confidence in my ability to administer social programs effectively, but the complex fiscal accountability required by two funding programs would have been very difficult without the assistance we received from the Accounting Aid Society."*

—MARJORIE FRAZIER, INKSTER COMPREHENSIVE SERVICES, DETROIT

NAAPI has now grown to 15 separate API organizations in major cities. When it initially handled controversial public interest cases no one else would take, the organization was subject to inevitable criticism, but, in the words of San Francisco consultant Sara M. Moore of Touche Ross: "We are now building a solid reputation based on quality control and the excellence of our volunteer members, including many from big eight firms."

One public interest project, in which Wally Little of the firm's Los Angeles office participated, did not produce the report the client anticipated. The Marin Conservation League wanted to know the tax impact on community property if a scenic ridge area was purchased by the city through a general obligation bond and left undeveloped, as opposed to being developed for housing by a private corporation.

"I put in nearly two months of my time on it along with two other people," says Little, who then lived in the San Francisco area. "I made the initial contact with the League, scoped the engagement to meet their needs, wrote the program, supervised student volunteers, and helped interview key people at city hall and on the school board."

The report indicated that higher property taxes would result if the land were left undeveloped. It is API policy to release all its findings to the public, and the report was picked up by the local newspaper, which may have contributed to the defeat of the bond issue at the polls.

Another public interest study began when many California nursing homes began not to accept Medi-Cal patients, claiming reimbursement rates were too low. Sara Moore is one of the API volunteers participating in the inquiry sought by

the Coalition for Nursing Home Reform, which is comprised of 100 non-profit organizations.

"We are helping the Coalition determine the true costs of operating a nursing home, how much actually goes to patient care," says Moore. The Coalition wants this input to help it decide if an item-linked or variable reimbursement is a valid alternative to a straight increase. It also wants to evaluate the link between cost and the quality of care. The year-long study, involving about 20 volunteers, is funded in part by the prestigious San Francisco Foundation. Its report will be released later this summer.

Who is the real Sara Moore, the practical accountant or the idealistic volunteer? "I'm not just a do-gooder," she says, laughing away the possibility. "I do it because it gives me a chance to have a real impact on the society we are building for ourselves."

Organizing a volunteer program is not easy. Some groups are effective in one area, less so in the next. Often, too, services are duplicated in localities, such as a heavy commitment to one-on-one counseling, while the community cries out for broader based educational seminars and large-scale training centers.

One of the most thriving volunteer operations is the Accounting Aid Society of Metropolitan Detroit. Eleven Touche Ross professionals involved are Jim Hookewater, Dan Gruber, Jim Wyatt, Mike O'Linn, Greg Hall, Larry Goldstein, Paul Lober, Dennis Spenceley, Jack

*Both recreational and tutoring assistance is provided to these inner city youth of Detroit by the Cass Corridor Youth Advocates.*

Trainer Dave Ward, and Ron Maday. They have ranked their office among the most generous in Detroit in terms of volunteer hours.

The list of services offered by the Detroit group is just as impressive as is the roll call of accounting firms supporting it. Some of the activities focus on individual counseling for the small or minority businessman with an inability to pay and the non-profit group which needs the service.

Much of the work is handled by a team—the volunteer accountant and a business or accounting student from a local university. The students are given responsibility for digging out information, providing them with an on-the-job challenge and invaluable experience.

But the service doesn't stop there. When AAS of Detroit undertakes to assist you, you are given a total financial profile based on work done by a volunteer, a student, a full-time staff attorney if necessary, and a group of trained bookkeepers. The bookkeepers, about 25 of them, are part of an AAS training program financed by a city grant. The Society selects participants for the program from among minority and disadvantaged groups, trains them, uses their services within the Society to help others, and then sends them out with a very employable skill.

The Detroit society has a full range of services for small non-profit organizations, which in turn are usually geared to service the poverty groups. Its tax program was certainly one of the most money-saving, street-level programs to benefit the community in some time. Over 100 accountants, students, and lawyers helped 2,500 low income families file federal tax forms. The service was

*"Government audits in recent years have been very strict in holding officers accountable for the expenditure of funds. Without help from professional accountants, we would not have been able to keep our books properly."*

—JAMES FRAZER, CASS CORRIDOR, DETROIT

free. The total refund for the families was nearly \$700,000.

Although Ron Maday is interested in such success, he is also interested in the inner city psychology. He explains:

"Communicating to minority groups from your position as an accountant can be a real problem. There is little identification between the two groups. Instead, there is often mistrust. These people are not going to accept you or what you're telling them simply because you're an accountant and you're wearing a suit." He shakes his head, "You have to meet that identity challenge and relate to them." The young, he notes, are particularly mistrustful.

Fred Fuchs, a partner who recently moved from Denver to San Francisco, has experienced many of the same situations as Ron and certainly shared many of the same responses.

Some years ago, around 1969, Fuchs recalls, "a group of us were brainstorming, and we all agreed we had to get involved with minority needs." One question was on their minds that night in Denver, Fuchs says: what can we do to get the profession going? "We came up with three or four projects which would depend on volunteer efforts." Fuchs ticks them off as if they were freshly discovered: help for the disadvantaged businessman, accounting and

bookkeeping seminars for community groups, recruitment of minority and disadvantaged youth into the accounting field and obtaining scholarship funds for them, and assistance to low-income taxpayers. ("We would be available on Sundays in the church basement.") By the time Fuchs left Denver, the group had 150 active volunteers, or 10 percent of the Colorado Society of CPAs.

Some of these programs were more successful than others. Some are still going strong and others like the individual counseling of the disadvantaged businessmen were considered less productive. Fuchs mentions, as did Ron Maday, the communication problem which eventually killed the counseling project:

"They just didn't trust us," he explains. "You would make appointment after appointment to meet with them or for a conference at the bank, and they just wouldn't show up. Yet the big training programs were always well attended. I think we discovered that face-to-face, there was mistrust, but in the anonymity of a large group, much could be accomplished."

More recently, Fuchs has volunteered for NAAPI and worked with the Small Business Development (SBD) program of the AICPA. "We're trying to develop an awareness of the program," he explains, "to get it some priority in AICPA." Now he is a member of the SBD committee, which is preparing a staff guide for state society volunteer programs. "A Guide for State Societies" and "BIG," an English/Spanish textbook for minority businessmen, will be two

manuals based on experiences like those of Fuchs in Denver.

Where will the volunteer programs go from here? Dayton partner Jim Bresnahan served for three years on NAA's Socio-Economic Committee. There are three areas of activity, he says: information services, education and training services, perhaps through a local university, and one-on-one counseling. Such programs are at different stages of development in different cities, he points out, but more than 100 chapters of NAA have active programs.

He also cites strong, often independent programs in such cities as Cincinnati, Houston, and Charlotte, "where there is a vocal element that says, yes, all these programs are constructive and meet both the business and public needs of society. Some other cities," he adds, "hesitate to offer counseling—not because of a possible legal liability, which has proven inconsequential, but because they ask whose role it is to help the disadvantaged and how far should one go."

But no program, Bresnahan believes, has reached its peak activity. "The need for assistance is going to be with us in the foreseeable future. The problem now is communicating the programs' value to potential users. The key is going to be the attitude that the professional takes. He cannot be merely offering free help to the needy; he has to believe in the people he is helping." ◊