



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Love Our Cities: How a City-Wide Volunteer Day Can Unite and Transform Your Community

By Jeff Pishney and Eric Jung

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met March 6, 2024 to discuss *Love Our Cities: How a City-Wide Volunteer Day Can Unite and Transform Your Community*. Pishney and Jung are founders of an organization called Love Our Cities, which helps people around the country organize and manage day-long volunteer events. This is a book about their experience with civic volunteering, how an event in one California city gave birth to a new approach to community involvement, and what Pishney and Jung have learned along the way.

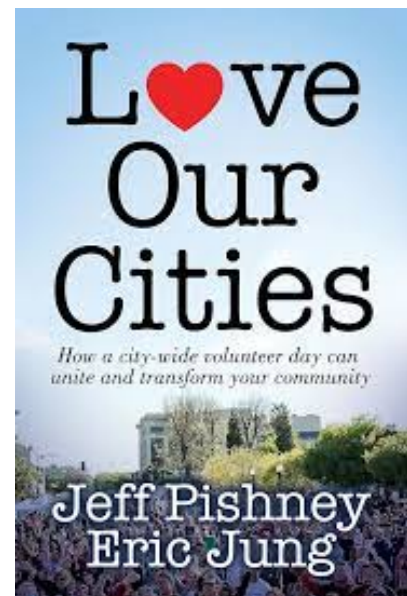
What have they learned? A great deal about volunteering, what motivates people to work on behalf of their community, and the benefits these volunteer efforts bring to cities.

In our discussion of the book, we focused on two main questions: How does volunteering benefit citizens and cities? And what have the authors learned that could make Urban Atlanta better?

Six Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are six “big ideas” drawn from *Love Our Cities* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. People who volunteer for community-improvement projects become active citizens, and their awareness and involvement make cities stronger.
2. We need volunteer-management organizations like Love Our Cities because these groups know how to create meaningful community-improvement projects and bring people into this work. Governments can cooperate with these efforts but cannot replace them.



3. Volunteer management is harder than it seems. Good organizations build relationships with nonprofits, plan events that give volunteers insight into the community, and help nonprofit leaders manage volunteers.
4. The aim is to create involvement that lasts longer than a single day. It is critical, then, that nonprofits be willing partners in “volunteer day” planning because they are the gateways to lasting involvement.
5. People will volunteer, if asked the right way. And many will continue with civic involvement if the experience is meaningful and the nonprofit is skilled at using volunteers.
6. If Atlanta had a volunteer-management organization like Love Our Cities, we believe it should experiment with scale. Urban Atlanta is such a big place, we believe it is important to offer volunteer opportunities for parts of it: a “Love Cascade Heights” effort, for example, or a “Love East Atlanta” day.

Why Do These Things?

Pishney and Jung’s book makes the case for civic involvement and volunteerism. And it shows how to dramatically expand the work of volunteers through good planning and creative marketing. But should we have a volunteer-management organization like Love Our Cities in Urban Atlanta? We think so. Here’s why:

- It would create active citizenship and civic pride.
- Volunteering for community-improvement projects would show people how their communities worked. This would make them better citizens and informed voters.
- Nonprofits would benefit greatly, first by accomplishing projects that need large numbers of volunteers, then with lasting involvement from some who are introduced to their mission. Volunteers will give their labor, of course, but many will also give money.
- Another benefit for nonprofits is introducing them to one another during the planning process. They will learn from each other.
- The Covid pandemic dealt a blow to community involvement. A well-planned and marketed day of volunteering might be the thing to restore active citizenship.
- As we’ve learned from other books, we need good advocates for urbanist ideas. Not all who volunteer will make good advocates, but volunteering is a necessary first step.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile changes create opposition. That’s true even for something as desirable as building civic involvement and volunteerism. So our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Inertia: We have many issues in Urban Atlanta. Why should we address this one?
- Leadership: Who will take on this challenge?
- There may be two forms of “turf protection.” First, from nonprofits that already have good volunteer programs. They may not want to share what they know with others.
- Second form of turf protection: From nonprofit staffs that value financial contributions far more than volunteer labor.
- These volunteer day events are difficult to plan and execute. Will they be sustainable?

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming these barriers:

- There is a deep well of leadership in existing civic institutions, from churches to neighborhood associations. We can find people who will take on the challenge of creating a successful volunteer day.

- The connection between volunteering and contributing to a nonprofit is clear. Many nonprofits will have little trouble accepting it.
- Governments will embrace the volunteer day idea, too. They understand that active citizenship makes them more effective.
- Once started, these volunteer-management organizations get better at recruiting nonprofits, creating meaningful volunteer projects, teaching good volunteer management techniques and recruiting larger numbers of volunteers. As a result, their impact grows greater and greater.

A Synopsis of Love Our Cities

Love Our Cities is 218 pages, not including forward, preface and acknowledgements. There are 12 chapters organized into four parts, plus an introduction and afterword.

Pishney and Jung are founders of an organization called Love Our Cities. Before starting it, Pishney was a minister in Modesto, California, and Jung was a business and nonprofit executive.

This is a book about volunteering, what motivates people to volunteer, the benefits it brings to a city, and how a single day devoted to good works can be a source of continuing civic involvement. It was written by two people who learned these things after starting a community outreach program at a church.

It was an unlikely place and unlikely time for civic success. The church was in Modesto, a city of about 215,000 in northern California that's best known for two things: It is home for the E & J Gallo Winery empire and inspiration for George Lucas' 1973 movie "American Graffiti."

By 2009, when Pishney was asked to begin the outreach program at Big Valley Grace Community Church, Modesto was at a low ebb. The 2009 Great Recession had so devastated the local economy that some national publications listed it among the "worst cities in America." College students there wore T-shirts reading: "Modesto Sucks!"

But rather than problems, Pishney saw opportunities in connecting church members to the larger community, helping them do good work and, perhaps, lifting the city's spirits. The insulting T-shirts became an inspiration. He called his volunteer effort "Love Modesto."

The book tells how these ideas grew from a day of church involvement to a separate nonprofit that brought together people from different faiths and no religious faith, spread to communities near Modesto and finally became a national organization that includes more than 100 cities. By the authors' reckoning, more than 45,000 people have volunteered for community projects with Love Our Cities, donating a million hours of services that would be worth \$28.5 million if purchased from a vendor.

Along the way, Pishney and Jung learned:

- The secret to recruiting first-time volunteers was to make it easy to participate. Hence, a single, annual day of volunteering that begins with a party. ("What's not to love?" they write.)
- The greater the number of volunteers, the more others wanted to join. So an enormous effort went into marketing the day of volunteering. Yard signs with the words "Love Modesto" and the date were the most effective, they add.
- But one day obviously isn't enough. The real aim was to build compassion among the volunteers, so some would discover a cause and stay involved. The reaction they were looking for was, "Holy cow, I had no idea."
- To have an event that's easy to join but leads to lasting involvement, the day had to be well organized and memorable. It started with a celebration, then continued with meaningful projects managed by leaders who could direct people and explain why the work was important.

- The projects had to be “with and not for” people. This meant, if it were a neighborhood park cleanup, neighborhood people must be involved. That way, they say, builds “local ownership.”
- Behind all of this must be an organization that’s good at connecting people and groups. After all, the aim is to raise an army of volunteers to help existing organizations with important tasks that can be completed in a day. If others in the community—from Habitat for Humanity to the local food bank—didn’t have meaningful work to do, it was a wasted day. Envisioning and organizing the projects takes planning and strong relationships.
- It also takes a neutral convener. At a point, Love Modesto became too big to be owned by a single church. Also, Pishney and Jung realized there were other churches, temples, synagogues, nonprofits, government agencies—and just individuals—who would eagerly participate . . . but not if it were the project of a single religious institution. So Love Modesto became its own nonprofit, housed elsewhere in the city.
- Finally, they learned a great deal about relationship building and the role that trust plays. How do you build trust? By caring first about individuals, they write, and only later asking what others can do for you. If you do this—it’s another way of looking at the “love” in the organization’s name—trust becomes the “flywheel” that allows the organization to accomplish more and bigger things.

After Love Modesto moved out of the church, the founders still saw religious lessons in their work. One lesson came from the Christian commandment to “love your neighbor.” Over time, they write, they became convinced “there are two foundational elements to loving our neighbor.” One was to have compassion, the other is to approach others with humility—to listen and learn before helping.

About a third of the book is a “how-to” manual that walks readers through organizing and managing a volunteer day. (One chapter is titled “Nuts and Bolts.”)

One interesting detail is the number of volunteers the authors say organizers can expect the first year. Their formula: $\text{City Population} \times 1\% = \text{Total Volunteer Spots}$. If it’s a town of 15,000, they say, plan for 150 volunteer spots. Do it right, and those numbers will grow.

“It’s really pretty amazing how the math works out,” they add.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn’t to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.