



JOHNNY LOUIS/COURTESY

The Ghost Light Society volunteers meet for a retreat for their annual fundraiser at Broward Center for the Performing Arts in Fort Lauderdale.

Millennials find new ways to make a difference

BY JOHNNY DIAZ
Staff writer

In the age of the selfie, millennials sometimes get a bad rap for being self-involved.

But don't say that to millennials who are interested in making a positive impact.

"I think my generation is just as interested as previous generations, but maybe we look at the way we spend our time differently and are more interested in having meaningful experiences vs. accumulating a lot of stuff," said Lighthouse Point resident Maggie Gunther, 36, who considers herself "an old millennial" for being born in 1981. "We travel and we give our time to the greater good instead of owning McMansions full of things that won't bring us happiness."

Studies have shown that millennials — generally defined as those born between 1980 to 2000 — are purpose-driven, wanting to give their money and time to make a difference. They may just find "new and unique ways of doing so," according to a 2015 Pew Research Center study on millennials. The study found that this generation may volunteer in ways not always recognized as typical volunteer initiatives, because they may do it in groups with friends, relatives, through clubs, the work force, and online by gathering support for causes using social media.

A 2015 Millennial Impact Report, from the Case Foundation and research company Achieve, found that 70 percent of millennial employees volunteered at least one hour in 2014, while 37 percent volunteered up to 10 hours.

Gunther is active with myriad organizations, including the Broward Center for the Performing Arts' Ghost Light Society, a young professionals/donors group, and the Historic Stranahan House Museum. Her volunteer duties have run the gamut from serving breakfast at the Broward Partnership to advocating for stronger drunken-driving laws in Tallahassee.

She also participates in events such as Walk Like MADD and MADD Dash Fort Lauderdale 5K. For the annual MADD walk, she's



MAGGIE GUNTHER/COURTESY

Maggie Gunther, 36, volunteers at the Broward Partnership's Breakfast for Champions for the Homeless. Gunther is active with myriad organizations, including the Historic Stranahan House Museum.

typically out at 4 a.m. on the field to help set up for the event.

Why does she volunteer so much?

"It's very important to me, and it's part of my DNA, going back to being named 'most involved' in high school," said Gunther, who works full time as director of communications and programs for the Greater Fort Lauderdale Alliance.

For her volunteer work, Gunther was named one of "40 under 40" business leaders in Broward County last year by the South Florida Business Journal.

"I just can't help but want to be involved, sometimes to the point of overcommitting. Volunteer leadership and service is a way to make your community a better place to live," she said. "It has also been the way I've made my best friends. There's something about the relationships you form with people when you're working together on something you're passionate about. It lasts a lifetime."

Gunther says she has also used charitable efforts to get through

difficult times. In 2010, she lost her sister to cancer. In her honor, Gunther established the Michelle Catania Children's Theater Program at her community theater in New Jersey.

Lauren Fyke, 33, is also involved with the Ghost Light Society, serving as co-chairwoman of its steering committee and helping plan its annual fundraiser soiree, which took place Nov. 4 at the Parker Playhouse in Fort Lauderdale. The volunteer group's mission is to inspire a new generation of patrons by supporting and promoting the performing arts.

The Pompano Beach resident joined the group in 2014 because of her childhood love of theater.

"When I heard about this group ... I definitely wanted to be a part of it," she said.

She was already a season ticket holder for the Broadway performances at the Broward Center, and she "wanted an outlet to get more involved."

Fyke believes fellow millennials also can help their careers by volunteering, because "it allows

them to cultivate skills and make connections that perhaps they can't make in their everyday lives."

"I have gotten a lot of leadership training and experience through my volunteer work that I can use in my career," said Fyke, a public relations representative for JM Family Enterprises Inc.

What's more, millennials tend to prefer working for employers that have a give-back-to-the-community spirit. A study released earlier this year by Deloitte, a consulting and financial advisory group, found that 76 percent of millennials see business as a means for positive social change.

Fyke said "the community-minded culture for which JM Family is so well-known was definitely a huge part of its appeal when I was applying for a job there."

Katie Torres, 32, has been volunteering since high school.

"That's when I knew that was something I wanted to do in my life," says Torres, of Delray Beach, who volunteers about five to 10 hours a month.

Since moving to South Florida from her native Wisconsin six years ago, she has volunteered at Riverwalk Fort Lauderdale's Burger Battle event, and for Leadership Broward Inc., a nonprofit leadership training group, as a co-chairwoman for its Fort Lauderdale Turkey Trot fundraiser on Thanksgiving Day.

"I know nonprofits are short on staff and resources and funds. Anything I can do to help make that a little easier, or help make it a little more successful is rewarding for me, too," she said.

Her volunteer work led Torres to a job at Covenant House Florida, a Fort Lauderdale nonprofit that helps homeless children and youth. Although she no longer works there, she has continued volunteering as part of the Young Professionals for Covenant House, helping with fundraisers and raising awareness about the nonprofit.

She has also participated in Covenant House's annual "Sleep Out" event to show solidarity with homeless youth.

"We sleep on the street for one night and meet the kids from Covenant House," said Torres, who works as a licensed agent at Cato Insurance Group, which has offices in Fort Lauderdale and Coral Springs.

Jim Gress, executive director of Covenant House Florida, said he appreciates the work that millennial volunteers like Torres perform at the nonprofit.

"They are very important for our work. Part of the reason is that they are not terribly far away from the age of the clients that we work with," Gress said. "They are at the beginning of their careers and they can sometimes provide a realistic and relatable story to the young people that we have about where they are in life, how they go to where they are, and what their career ambitions and goals are ... There is a commonality there."

"I do think that sometimes we do get a bad rap," added Torres. "But I would venture to say that I think it's quite the contrary ... I definitely see people have a big heart, and they are invested in our community and want to make changes and want to effect change for the better."