

# VOLUNTEER TO WORK:

## THE START OF MAINEWARMERS

by Betsy Hanscom

**Dare to Dream.** I never dreamed that volunteering would help me develop the skills, resources, and confidence to start my own business. Friends and relatives urged me for years to sell the microwavable heating pads like the ones I gave them to relieve aches and pains. But I felt discouraged by my lack of business education and experience. Then one day the light came on! If I could help volunteer organizations set goals, develop strategies; write grants and newsletters, coordinate conferences and other events, then I could run a business!

**The Journey.** After teaching school for three years I stayed home to raise my children. Here I found the flexibility to develop other interests and to maintain a sense of vitality. By volunteering I was able to find adult companionship and relieve the feeling of isolation associated with raising young children. At the Friends of the Library I found other mothers with young children who shared playtime with mine while we shared a new vision for the library. Then, with a move to a new community and a bit of volunteer experience under my belt, I joined an art club, became its chair, organizing and planning workshops in drawing and painting. One activity led to another, and my career as a volunteer expanded to include coordinating the Society of Children's Book Writer's New England Conference in 1990, chairing a high school PTA, working on the development of an alternative school, and negotiating a school-based mentoring partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters and the local School Department. With all of these activities, I faced the challenges similar to those of a business.

**Learning through Volunteer Work.** One of my favorite sayings is, "With trouble comes experience and with experience comes wisdom." With volunteering comes all three. It is constant problem solving, upgrading of



skills, learning new and more efficient techniques, and making a million phone calls. I find working with others on a project is stimulating, challenging, interesting, fun, and hard work. Anyone who has worked on a committee knows the frustrations and as well as the rewards of working with others. People have different agendas and styles. Most folks are nice; some are not. Everyone makes mistakes, and I have made plenty. Unless the goal is worthwhile and shared, most people will not stay involved.

**Commitment.** The advice I received before starting my business, MaineWarmers, is that it would not be easy, and it should be important to me because I would be spending long hours at it. My products relieve pain and bring comfort to people, and because of that I feel the work of manufacturing and selling them is worthwhile. I love it when someone tells me the heating pad he bought helped soothe the arthritis in his hands or brought warmth to cold feet for someone recuperating from surgery. This feedback is a part of what motivates me. It helps me overcome obstacles, deal with aggravations, correct mistakes, and stay focused.

**Networking.** Volunteering is great public relations and a way to establish a network of resources. Because of my volunteer work, people in my community know me, and that brings credibility to my business. Immediately after starting MaineWarmers, I joined the local Chamber of Commerce. There I met business people who helped me find needed resources and gave me lots of encouragement. Then by volunteering to help on a small Chamber project I met a woman who has a massage therapy business and online newsletter. She asked me to write an article about my business, then do a TV interview for a local cable show. These two activities were essentially free publicity!

**Talent.** Volunteer where you think you would like to work and you could end up working there. A good friend became the activities director at a senior citizens' home because she started as a volunteer while recuperating from an accident. The work ethic one shows through volunteer efforts mirrors his/her ability to work for financial gain. To be a good volunteer, employee, or business owner requires creativity and resourcefulness. My volunteer experiences taught me how to use my talents to run my business. What a great reward!

### **About the Author and owner of MaineWarmers:**

*Betsy Hanscom, owner of MaineWarmers [www.mainewarmers.com](http://www.mainewarmers.com), is a company that manufactures and sells microwavable heating pads used to relax sore muscles, relieve aches and pains, and stimulate circulation in cold fingers and toes. The heating pads don't look like medical devices, go in the car or to the office, come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and are guaranteed high quality Maine Made products.*