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Chicago Non-Profit Brings Speed Dating to the Volunteer Scene

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**RUBY TUESDAY: PICK OF THE WEEK**

**Ruby Tuesday Pick of the Week: WomenOnCall.org**  
**Why It's a Gem: The Chicago-based organization makes it a snap for non-profits and volunteers to find each other.**

In this week's Ruby Tuesday, we're deviating from our regular focus to highlight a



not-for-profit organization rather than a for-profit business. With the economy in a perpetual swan dive, non-profit organizations are just as likely as for-profits to be floundering — or worse. But some organizations are using the recent sea change in the zeitgeist to tap into the nation's tidal wave of newfound volunteers, some of whom were victims of layoffs, while others simply felt the undercurrent of change sweeping the country and decided it was time to play their part. Margo Pritzker recognized the value of this spate of volunteers when she founded [WomenOnCall.org](http://WomenOnCall.org), a web-based network devoted to matching professional women volunteers with non-profit organizations.

**Lynda Resnick:** You're a matchmaker for women who have skills and talent to offer a non-profit organization. What inspired you to launch this organization, as busy as you are?

**Margo Pritzker:** I think really what inspired me was I'd served non-profits on boards and committees, and noticed that many non-profits with limited resources could not get the sort of professional help they needed without

paying huge amounts of money. They could do it the usual way by putting people on boards and getting pro bono help, or they could raise the funds and go out and find professional help. On the other side, I found a lot of professional women with the kind of skills that [the non-profits] wanted who were willing to give some of their time but did not want to sit on boards or committees.

Looking at these two groups of people, I thought, wouldn't it be great if we could put them together in an efficient way? And, of course, the Internet is a very efficient way.

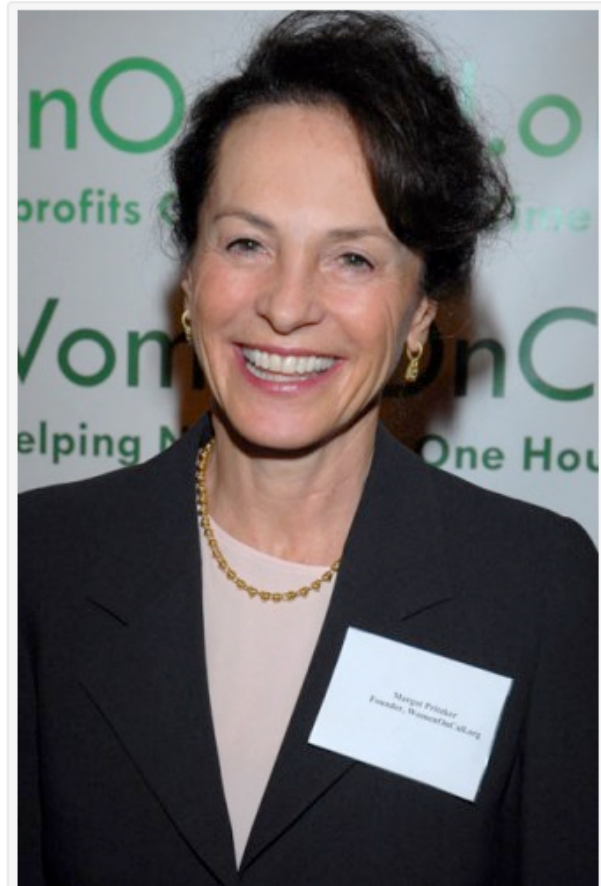
**LR:** This is so brilliant. It was always web-based from its inception?

**MP:** It was. I had originally thought of doing a magazine, and somebody said, "Are you crazy? Nobody does a magazine these days. You do the Internet!"

That was three years ago, and it's been sort of slow. But with the downturn of the economy, we've seen an uptick that's quite incredible.

**LR:** I was at a speech the other day, and a young man in the audience was asking how he could have more success with his non-profit, and I was giving him some ideas. But then I looked at his literature, and it was incomprehensible. So, you can give the ideas, but you have to start with the basics — of communicating the basic idea of what they do.

You say that because of the downturn in the economy, you've seen a big uptick.



Can you quantify how big it's gotten?

**MP:** Not in actual numbers. But more than two million people have lost their jobs, and as you know, many of those are very talented and experienced people who are now looking at volunteering as ways to maybe find their next job, maybe find other interests, but also using their time to volunteer. We have a meet-and-match each year, which is based around speed dating.

**LR:** Brilliant!

**MP:** We had about 74 of our non-profits come to this last event. About 300 volunteers came, which was almost triple the amount we usually have. We give each a non-profit number, and they go and sit down at the table. The non-profit has to make their pitch in five minutes, and then the volunteer moves to the next table.

**LR:** That is brilliant, because that will help them whether they use a volunteer or not. It's such great training. I always say, it's like pitching a movie in Hollywood: If you can't say it in one sentence, people are going to be bored. So you have to be able to communicate your idea very clearly.

A lot of the questions that I get on my "Ask Lynda" blog come from non-profits. And we try to help. But of course, the help is a bit superficial, because I'm not looking at all their materials. But what you're doing is real, in-depth sea changes with these people.

**MP:** We're trying to. You know, I think the whole name "non-profit" needs to be changed. It sets them up immediately as something fuzzy, instead of a for-profit. Maybe you could come up with something, because you're a marketer. We say "social services." Whatever it is, they need a new name, to make them start thinking more like a for-profit.



**LR:** Exactly. There are a lot of words I'd like to change. I'd like to change "embryo stem cell" to something else. Sometimes you're just set up for failure, you know?

So, do you have more of one kind of discipline than another, as far as the professionals are concerned?

**MP:** No. They're all over the place. We have everything from people who are experienced in development — who are, of course, the ones who are most in demand — we have lawyers and accountants and doctors and teachers, vets, PR people, IT people — you name it, we have it on the site. And the non-profits are the same. They cover the gamut from religious non-profits to one called **Babes with Blades**. With a name like "Women on Call," we thought, now we have something a little off color! They teach fencing skills to inner-city youth as ways of building their self-confidence. They just have an odd name. We have a lot of theatre groups, animal groups — everything you can think of. We have about 1,000 members now — about 350 non-profits, and the rest are volunteers.

**LR:** Oh, that's fantastic. It's just in Chicago, correct?

**MP:** They're all over Illinois, but it's mostly the greater Chicago area. The idea this year is to move into another state. The whole idea of WomenOnCall is that we are a template or a tool that can be used anywhere, and so the idea is to be in every state in the U.S.

**LR:** So, if you get the right exposure, and other people in other states see this, they could franchise your idea?

**MP:** Yes, it really doesn't take very much. What we need in another state is another me, somebody who is out there actively promoting the non-profit, by going to visit people, like sponsors. Other than that, it's quite a simple concept.

**LR:** It's brilliant. Of course, you've left — to paraphrase Cary Grant — another sex out, half of the world's population. So, can you tell me why it's just women who are volunteering?

**MP:** There isn't really a hard reason. Really it was just narrowing my focus.

**LR:** And you know what? That's a good thing, because we can't be all things to all people. But a lot of people are too broad when they go out with a project. I had a question yesterday from a company that's just growing like top seed, but they can't control the growth. This way, you're focused and you can control your growth, so you do a good job.

Can you tell us just a quick story about some of the successes?

**MP:** At the meet-and-match, a graphic designer met a non-profit that deals with the elderly, and they had a brochure that they were putting out to raise funds. It was a terrible brochure, and the graphic designer looked at it and said, "You know, let me take this home with me." And that night, she redesigned their brochure and sent it back to them. It was all done in the space of an evening. Hers was a very quick, efficient example that made a huge difference to this tiny

non-profit that was doing great work.

I answered an alert for judges for history projects for Chicago public schools. I went one Saturday morning, spent a wonderful couple of hours with these kids judging these projects — something I would never have found before — and it was over in a couple of hours. I go home and go about my business.

**LR:** And be happy for the rest of the month. There's nothing like giving back.

**MP:** No, there's nothing like giving back — if you can do it in an efficient way. With so many boards — and I don't have to tell you, Lynda — you sit, you spend a lot of your time, and not much gets done.

**LR:** It's so true.

**MP:** You go home very dissatisfied, whereas this is a discreet project, you do it, you feel good about it, and you go on to the next one.

**LR:** I hope that people read about this today and are inspired. It would be great if these could pop up in various states in America. The need is so great.

I wonder about these young people that are graduating from business school this year, and what they're going to do when they thought they were going into finance. Have you seen recent graduates attracted to what you are doing?

**MP:** We certainly have recent graduates, and we do target them. We target young people generally. Do you ever use volunteers in your companies?

**LR:** What we do at **Roll** is we give every employee a thousand dollars a year to invest in charity.

**MP:** Yes! I read about that in *Rubies in the Orchard*. That's a wonderful idea.

**LR:** But we know now that we have to get more active than just giving money. The company is very active in building schools. We are building a **charter**

**school with Bard** now. We just opened a LEED-certified platinum preschool in the Central Valley — I wish I could go take a little pill and be Alice and go back there. It's so wonderful. And we send the kids in the Central Valley to college whose parents work for us, if they get a 2.8 average.

**MP:** I read about that. We'll start targeting those business schools. We've got Kellogg, we've got USC. So this is a very good idea to talk to these people about what they could be doing with their time. We're hoping our new president will actually call for a year of service from some of these recent graduates from college, from business schools.

**LR:** You know the president. Do you think that's going to happen? I mean, is it imminent?

**MP:** Well, he's talked about it. I think he's got a lot on his plate right now...

**LR:** You think?

**MP:** Yeah, a little bit. He may not be focusing on that, but, God, I'd love to see that.

**LR:** Are you using **search engine optimization** to get out there?



**MP:** Yes. We are, and it hasn't done us much good, yet. But we are doing that. It's just finding the right words.

**LR:** It's an art and a science, as you know. And it takes a while to click in. And what about keywords for "volunteering in Chicago" and all that sort of thing?

**MP:** For us, it's "women," "volunteering," "professional women." It's trying to find words that make us stand out.

**LR:** "Chicago" would be the word. And it would be a lot less money because you wouldn't be competing with every non-profit in the world.

**MP:** Well, thank you for that.

**LR:** I wish I could quit my job and come and do what you're doing. It just sounds so fabulous.

**MP:** You keep doing what you're doing. You don't have to quit your job for this. If we get one in LA, we can get you on as a volunteer to give people lessons in marketing.

**LR:** Wouldn't that be great?