

Why do we ask the finest to burn themselves out?

I am not used to being quoted. I've found it's much safer to be on the other side of the interview. So I was a little surprised the other day to see that a local nonprofit had lifted some of my precious words (each one a gem) for use in its annual report.



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My remarks had to do with the way in which nonprofits handle their finances. This particular nonprofit—Mercy Corps International—has overhead expenses of less than 10 percent. That's very good, even by corporate standards.

In part, Mercy Corps has been able to do this by staying focused. It targets aid, much of it "material" rather than financial, to certain regions of the world where it has some expertise and some structure in place. It tends to work harmoniously with other aid agencies so they're not duplicating services in emergency hot spots where waste simply cannot be tolerated.

Built into that low overhead is something else that nonprofit executives and employees are all too familiar with: long hours for relatively low wages, by for-profit standards.

The folks at Mercy Corps are dedicated beyond belief. They see suffering and they want it to stop *now*, even though they know in the backs of their minds and in that bleak spot in their hearts that suffering never leaves the world's stage. So they push themselves to do more. They postpone their vacations, work nights and weekends, and try not to think about the personal lives they might have had.

Mercy Corps certainly hasn't cornered the market on this nonprofit burnout syndrome. If you spend any time with the people who run those organizations you donate money or time or old clothes to, you start to hear the same stories over and over.

Take Jean DeMaster. She was just recruited to run the Greater Portland YWCA, a task which, having seen the YW from the inside, I can safely say is going to be enormous.

Everyone I talked to about DeMaster raved about her. And they all underscored her ability to work 80 hours a week to get the job done. You see, that's what she did when she was battling homelessness as executive director of Transitions Project Inc. here.

She built Transitions Project into a real force in the community, an agency doing the kind of work we as citizens of this town expect of the nonprofits.

But 80 hours a week? Is that what we really want to ask of these selfless, driven people? No matter how committed one is to a cause, can anyone long be effective under those conditions?

Well, a lot of times, if you take a job with a nonprofit, you just don't have a choice. If you want to make an impact, you have to do the time.

That's what Bill Bulick said recently. Bulick's been the executive director of the Regional Arts & Culture Council

since 1989. Like DeMaster, he built up his nonprofit into a major fund-raising force in the community.

In late June he announced he would step down by year-end to devote himself to an arts consulting business. I asked him why he decided to leave. There were several reasons. But among the most significant was the time.

"I *never* work less than 50 hours a week. Usually, it's more," he said. "It's a hard job to turn off. I love art and dance and music, so my wife and I attend a lot of events. But I'm never just there as a spectator. It's like I'm still on the job."