

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

# Community groups called key to our future

By Paula Schwed  
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Jeremy Rifkin, head of the Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington, recently addressed the annual summit of the Nonprofit Resource Center in Atlanta on the need for those in the "third sector" — the not-for-profit companion of the government and business sectors — to become a strong social force to reinforce community bonds in American life.

The author of "The End of Work," Rifkin is an expert on the effects of the computer revolution on the workplace. He believes the end of work could signal either "the death of civilization" or "a great social transformation."

**Q.** At this meeting of representatives from Georgia's nonprofits, you urged them to discuss their common goals and then try to resurrect the "third sector" they belong to and become a great political force to strengthen community. How do you describe what the third sector means?

**A.** The French call it "the social economy." I like to call it the civil society. You can call it the third sector, the independent sector. It's really the culture. It's the center of this community. It's the church groups, it's the sports and cultural organizations, the fraternal groups, the social service providers. It's everything from the Lions Club to the Assembly of God food kitchen to the NAACP to the Sierra Club.

**Q.** Why is the nonprofit sector so important?

**A.** Strong communities come first. The stronger the civil soci-



**Jeremy Rifkin** believes civic groups such as the church, fraternal groups and cultural organizations keep communities strong.

ety, the stronger the marketplace and the more democratic the government. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited America, he said these civic associations you Americans make with each other are the seeds of your greatness as a people. Americans don't wait for government to take care of what needs to be done. They do it on their own, through churches and civic groups and the like.

**Q.** What makes business and government sectors far more powerful than nonprofit groups?

**A.** We've taken the civil society for granted. In the last century, community was very important in the day-to-day lives of first- and second-generation Americans. It was these kinds of affiliations and community organizations that brought them and their families into the American experience.

**Q.** What do you mean when you say that the third sector can provide meaningful opportunities for people displaced from the workplace?

**A.** The government is shrinking and downsizing. Businesses are automating, and that means fewer jobs. What are all these young people going to do in the future? We have to find new venues for people to engage in, beyond the marketplace. Pay for prisons, or pay for new opportunities. Why not free up these young people to create social capital?

**Q.** How do you convince young people it's meaningful to serve the community?

**A.** Now we're beginning to realize what's been lost. This third sector has been marginalized, partly because it's been led by women. Women learned they were not valued because their work was not paid. They aren't doing this anymore because they're doing paid work. But there's a quiet revolution called civil education. Educators have found that children learn by going out into the community where they live, they learn through personal interaction and accountability. The primary responsibility of every person is to civic society.