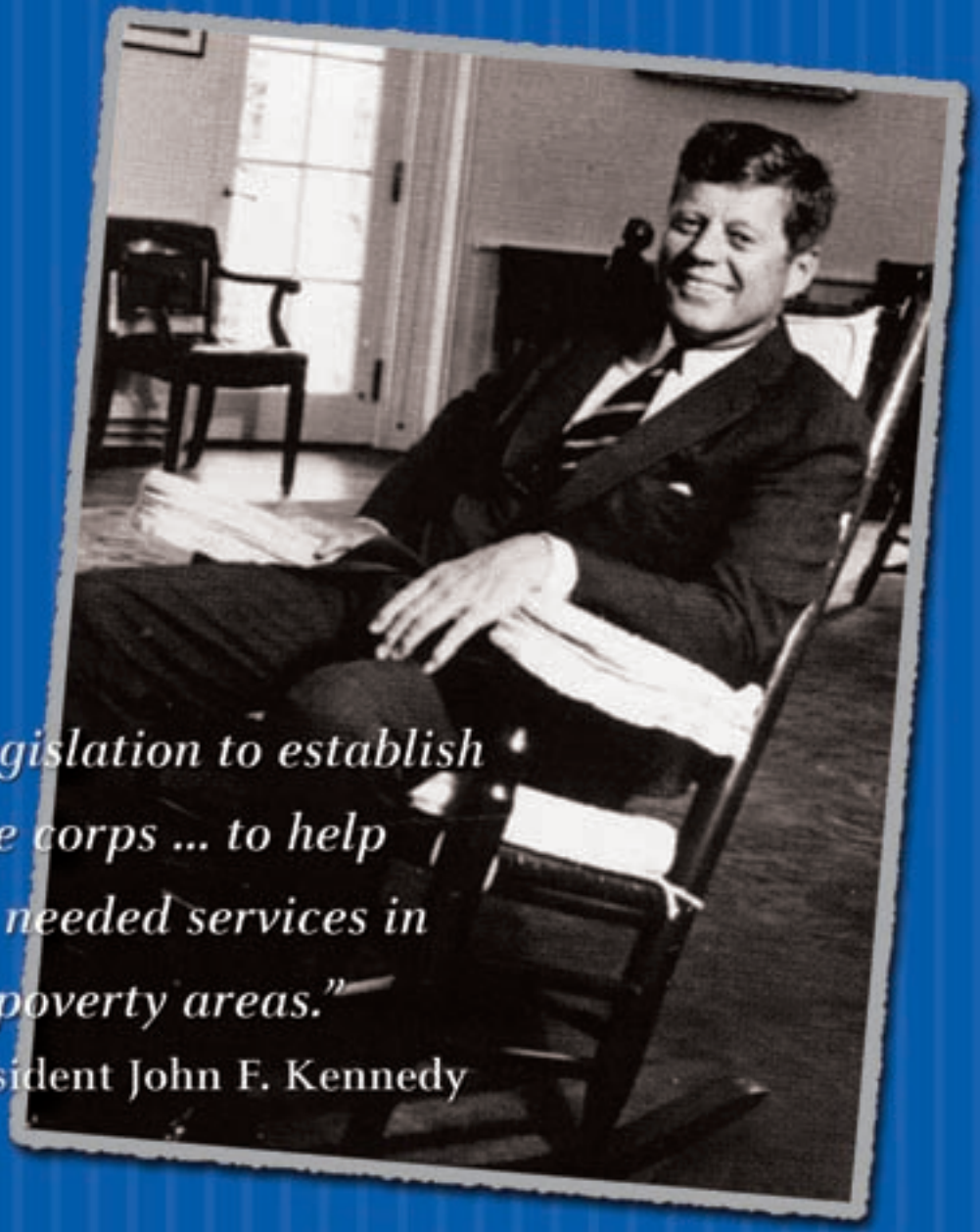
VISTA ... *In Service to America*

FIGHTING POVERTY FOR 40 YEARS



"I ... recommend legislation to establish a national service corps ... to help provide urgently needed services in urban and rural poverty areas."

—President John F. Kennedy

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For more than 40 years, VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) has been in the forefront of helping communities across America to help themselves fight poverty. Our members devote a year of their lives to challenge poverty's root causes. They do this by mobilizing community volunteers and local resources, and by increasing the capacity of people to rely on themselves. VISTA members help to address societal problems that may be contributing to the poverty.

The list of VISTA programs that have helped bring people out of poverty is extensive. Members have established health clinics, neighborhood watches, and computer training programs. They have formed many of our nation's literacy programs, along with Upward Bound, Head Start programs, and adult education initiatives. Parents who want to work or to develop a skill can send their children to after-school clubs, athletics, and day care centers run by VISTA members. VISTA service has led to urban renewal programs and neighborhood beautification. Most importantly, many programs established by VISTA members continue long after they complete their service.

Through VISTA, individuals and communities gain the knowledge and tools they need to finally get on the other side of poverty. This is our members' legacy, a legacy 40 years in the making, a legacy that has left an indelible mark of achievement, a legacy that provides hope. Most of all, it's a legacy of service to America.

The stories in this book are the foundations of that legacy: stories of ordinary people meeting extraordinary challenges. These stories echo the testimony of a group more than 140,000 strong.

But a strong foundation is not enough. While this volume honors all those VISTA members who have helped create it, we hope that it encourages you to consider your own service to America. VISTA, now part of AmeriCorps, is as strong and vital today as it has ever been, with more than 6,000 opportunities to serve each year. Perhaps in these testimonials, you will discover what has been a fact since 1965: For those who are capable and willing, there is a place to serve in VISTA.

1965-1969

"In your hands, my fellow citizens, more than mine, will rest the final success or failure of our course."

With those words in 1961, President John F. Kennedy launched the War on Poverty. President Kennedy never saw his initiative materialize, but his successor, President Lyndon Johnson, followed his lead and ushered through Congress the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which created a domestic volunteer program to engage Americans in the fight.

In December 1964, the first 20 VISTA members met with President Johnson at the White House *(see photo below)*. "Your pay will be low; the conditions of your labor often will be difficult," he told them. "But you will have the satisfaction of leading a great national effort, and you will have the ultimate reward which comes to those who serve their fellow man."

President Lyndon Johnson, 1964

In the beginning, VISTA members such as Linda Alkana (*Lunch in the Kitchen)* worked to establish Head Start sites. But the program soon grew beyond that. From 1966 through 1968, VISTA members like Lee Grant *(The Black Cadillac)* strengthened communities by establishing and organizing a wider range of resources for the poor.

By the end of the 1960s, VISTA members were serving with hundreds of community-based sponsors across the nation. Among the new programs was Professional Corps, which recruited lawyers, doctors, and architects to help revitalize dilapidated areas. To engage busy college students, VISTA established a program called Summer Associates, which offered students the opportunity to spend their summers serving in local programs.

The impact of VISTA and the War on Poverty during their first half-decade was undeniable. As Alkana writes, "I think we made a positive impact in Scranton because we bridged the gap between the community, which was wary of the federal government, and the federal government itself." Just a year after Alkana completed her service in 1966, VISTA had more than 3,000 volunteers in 412 anti-poverty projects nationwide.

1970-1979

In the 1970s, VISTA volunteers continued empowering communities to take control of their own fate, often training them on how to organize together to address neighborhood needs. Volunteers helped community residents take action against unfair slumlords, unfair retail pricing, and poor community maintenance. As a part of President Richard Nixon's Reorganization Plan,

enacted in 1971, VISTA joined the ACTION agency. President Nixon wanted to ensure the impact of VISTA continued within the community even after VISTA members completed their service.

To achieve community self-sufficiency and the sustainability of community-based programming, VISTA started recruiting volunteers from the communities being served in addition to volunteers who relocated to other parts of the country most in need. Local volunteers such as Linda Sunde *(The Job I Was Meant to Have)* brought a community spirit to the program that can only be achieved through a close relationship between the volunteer and the community he or she serves.

The 1970s also saw tremendous growth in the Professional Corps that was created in the late 1960s to enlist lawyers, doctors, and architects. At one time, 150 architects served 32 different projects to fight the ravages of urban decay.

VISTA Thomas Taylor with George Price, Desire Community Center Executive Director, 1971

But buildings were not all that was constructed during this time. When volunteers built upon the achievements of their predecessors, the benefits were multiplied. Ginlin Woo *(Legacy to Legacy)* recalls the catalytic multiplying effect of service during her five years with VISTA community- and faith-based programs. To help bring more volunteers like Ginlin into the program, VISTA established the National Grant Program so local programs could attract and train VISTAs to support ongoing community projects.

The year following Ginlin's service, 1973, VISTA rose to 4,811 members. VISTA maintained this level of membership throughout the 1970s.

1980-1989

In 1983, budget cuts led to a reduction in VISTA volunteers and capabilities. However, volunteers continued to work with communities and help people in need. George Weber *(In My Back Yard)* worked with a specialty community, prisoners in a medium security prison, while Donna Shapiro Rabiner *(Shooting Up)* reached out to those who wanted to get off drugs. "My one-year assignment," Rabiner writes, "made me realize that I really could 'make a difference.'"

By 1985, the number of VISTAs who had served since the program's inception reached 80,000. New provisions in the Domestic Volunteer Service Act increased the scope of VISTA's duties, and in 1986, VISTA launched the VISTA Literacy Corps to encourage literacy in traditionally underserved regions.

VISTA continued to march forward when President George H.W. Bush called for greater volunteerism. In January 1989, President Bush said, "We will turn to the only resource we have that in times of need always grows—the goodness and the courage of the American people. I am speaking of a new engagement in the lives of others, a new activism, hands-on and involved, that gets the job done."

President Bush later said that of all the points of light, VISTA's shined the brightest.

1990-1999

President William Clinton built on President Bush's call to action by signing the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, making VISTA part of the new AmeriCorps and housing it under a new federal agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service.

The reorganization created a new name—AmeriCorps*VISTA. Reenergized, AmeriCorps*VISTA made great strides toward its goals. Ray Wright *(Just Getting Warmed Up)* tells the story of fighting homelessness and hunger in Detroit; Gordon Richins *(The Bright Side of a Wheelchair)* relates how AmeriCorps*VISTA helped him establish a new career after being paralyzed in a farm accident; and John Ossowski *(Testimony to a Legacy of Service)* tells how a community can reclaim its civic pride through simple actions.

In 1997, more than 3,300 volunteers served 700 community projects. Two years later, 5,500 volunteers served 1,200 projects. Previous literacy initiatives were combined under the America Reads program, consolidating resources to create adult-literacy, after-school, and summer programs. Welfare-to-Work AmeriCorps*VISTA projects were created to help break the welfare cycle.

2000-2005

AmeriCorps*VISTA embraced e-government in the new millennium by implementing an online recruitment system to gain support from a whole new generation of volunteers and sponsors. Since 2000, the number of members has reached its highest level ever—about 6,000 serving annually.

Many of those members with business skills in microenterprise lending and financial literacy helped to launch the Entrepreneur Corps, and hundreds responded to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. While disaster response is not AmeriCorps*VISTA's primary objective, disasters commonly hit poor people hardest and create a poverty-like situation for many more. We saw this when Hurricane Katrina profoundly affected the educational, health, nutritional, and economic infrastructure along the Gulf Coast. AmeriCorps*VISTA members responded initially by participating at relief centers and later by helping affected people get their lives back on track.

Recent volunteers have not only helped those in need, but have gained valuable personal experience that stays with them to this day. Bill Arnold *(Shaving My Head)* tells how literacy programs revitalized his own

community. Mehdi Sina *(My Time to Give)* credits his experience of receiving kindness for the kindness he now provides.

The Future

After more than 40 years of making a difference, VISTA sets the standard for volunteer mobilization and is leading the charge to answer President George W. Bush's call for volunteer action from every American. While the future of AmeriCorps*VISTA holds promise, it is not without its challenges. Requests for aid from local communities continue to exceed AmeriCorps*VISTA's ability to support response efforts. Helping close that gap is the growing number of cost-shares, where nonprofits help fund AmeriCorps*VISTA members serving in their organizations.

AmeriCorps*VISTA continues to achieve impressive long-term results in the communities it serves. Studies show that 70 percent of the programs supported by AmeriCorps*VISTA are still operating years after AmeriCorps*VISTA resources are no longer in the community. These programs have led to significant accomplishments in education, human needs, the environment, public safety, and organizational capacity.

For great examples of how programs assisted by AmeriCorps*VISTA have continued after AmeriCorps*VISTA's participation, read *Reality Declared*, by Wisconsin Congresswoman Gwendolynne Moore, and *I See VISTA's Legacy*, by former Washington Secretary of State Ralph Munro.

Studies alone don't adequately tell the story of VISTA's legacy of service. The real stories are told in the following pages. They tell of rebuilding neighborhoods, making communities safe from gangs, teaching people to read, feeding the homeless, addressing domestic violence, helping the impoverished succeed, providing positive role models, creating new businesses, and teaching citizens to take leadership roles.

These stories embody the legacy of service built by dedicated volunteers and alumni, and they provide a window into what AmeriCorps*VISTA can achieve in the future. They tell of the positive, lasting effects of VISTA service, both on the communities served and on the AmeriCorps*VISTA members themselves.

By supporting AmeriCorps*VISTA, whether through funding, in-kind donations, or volunteering, you can build on this legacy of service and help fight poverty across America. ★

1965–1969


When city, state and federal programs run out and even the landlords disappear... what's left?
VISTA
Put yourself where you're needed.
800-424-8580

Lunch in the Kitchen

By Linda Kelly Alkana—VISTA, 1965-1966, Scranton, Ark.

I was driving in Los Angeles, listening to the Beatles sing a cover version of a Ray Charles song—"Tell your mama, tell your pa, I'm gonna send you back to Arkansas"—when I heard about the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

VISTA Poster

I'd been a VISTA volunteer back in Arkansas three years earlier. Now, in 1968, with a Civil Rights leader murdered and many American cities in flames, my memories returned to Arkansas and to things I found as shocking as the assassination.

I was 18 years old when I joined VISTA and had just finished my first year at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), majoring in International Relations. I joined because, as a recent immigrant from Canada, I could not join the Peace Corps. I also joined VISTA because, as corny as it sounds, I wanted to help make the world a little better.

My family felt a mixture of pride and anxiety with me leaving college and home. They expressed more concern when they learned I was assigned to Arkansas, which at the time was infamous for its prejudices and its governor's celebrated stand against the integration of a Little Rock high school.

I was assigned to Paris, Ark., with Mary Ann Smerdel. We were two white 18-year-olds, she from Indiana and I from California. It was the time of the Civil Rights Movement, and in Arkansas "out-of-staters" meant "agitators." We were two non-southerners in a world where teenage girls either lived at home or were married, and here we were, two kids representing the not-too-popular government. We were placed in this town without transportation or a job and in humidity we'd never experienced. Fortunately for us, fellow VISTA volunteer Jossie Hughes, a retired writer, was assigned to a town a few miles away and we could see her periodically.

Paris, Ark., was like a movie set. It was a small town (population: 3,000) built around a town square. It was in that town square that I had my first exposure to the layers of prejudice in the South. Segregation was everywhere. "Whites Only" signs hung on park benches and water fountains, and the seemingly more innocuous "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone" messages were posted on restaurant windows. What surprised me more, however, was seeing black people get off the sidewalk to let a white person go by. I was outraged then, and I still am, to think that these wide, wooden sidewalks that framed the town square were a means of keeping some people "in their place."

Another event occurred a few weeks later that was equally as shocking. Mary Ann and I attended an introductory luncheon with VISTA bigwigs and some local Arkansas officials. One member of the Arkansas contingent was African American. He did not join us for lunch, but rather ate in the kitchen. In Canada and California I had read about segregation in schools, but never imagined it extended that far. I'll never forget my shock.

It was the memories of these events that gave me perspective during the turmoil in the days after King's assassination. It is probably this perspective that affected my career choice. I decided to pursue a graduate-level degree in history. Taking a cue from the Civil Rights Movement, I studied social change and how people come together to fight for their rights. Even during our training, we VISTA volunteers had a sense that history was being made. Later, working on my doctorate degree, I studied those who were making it.

While in Paris in 1965, Mary Ann and I organized a clothing drive, accompanied a welfare worker on her rounds, and finally made friends with some of the young people of the area. We had little to do in Paris, and many of its citizens were wary of us, a situation further aggravated when a black VISTA volunteer from out of state visited us. So we moved to Scranton, Ark. (population: 229) and worked as VISTA volunteers in Head Start and the grade school. We fit in better in Scranton, which was a small German Catholic community (Mary Ann and I were both Catholic).

In Scranton, our involvement with Head Start was fun. We loved the kids. We worked with the teachers and coordinated transportation to the school. Because both the government and the town wanted to get this program implemented, all children in this small, white community were part of the program. Its immediate success allowed us to "work our way out of the job." We then became involved with the grade school system. In Arkansas, this was an era before any special school programs. Students either sank or swam. Mary Ann and I worked with students who needed help—we tutored, we encouraged, and we made friends. We worked in concert with the Superintendent of Schools and the teachers. With Jossie's help, we also linked teenagers with possible employers.

The spirit behind the movements for social change that blossomed during that era's War on Poverty was immensely important. I think we made a positive impact in Scranton because we bridged the gap between the community, which was wary of the federal government, and the federal government itself. We helped the community understand that the federal government was waging the War on Poverty on the community's behalf.

Before we left, the citizens of Scranton called us to the school gym for a surprise "Thank You" award ceremony. Mary Ann became such a part of the community that she stayed there and married a local boy.

I left Arkansas with a greater belief in my abilities and a better understanding of different kinds of people. I eventually returned to UCLA, got my doctorate in history and now teach a university course on the United States in the 1960s, in which I incorporate my experiences with the War on Poverty and my memories of the Civil Rights Movement.

Today my students often ask me what they can do when they graduate. I tell them about AmeriCorps and encourage them to discover its possibilities. ★

Linda Kelly Alkana, today

House Parties to Powwows

By Clifford Richmond—VISTA, 1966-1967, Nez Perce Reservation, Idaho

I recently marked the 40th anniversary of my VISTA service. Looking back, I have many fond memories of that time. As one of the few African-American volunteers assigned to a Native American reservation, I feel pretty safe in saying that many of my experiences were unique.

VISTA Poster

Growing up in Columbus, Ohio, in the 1960s I never dreamed that one day I would hang out at powwows and rodeos instead of house parties and rock shows. That changed during my sophomore year at Ohio State University. I was thinking about taking a one-year break from school, so I submitted an application to VISTA. Several weeks later, I was on my way to Salt Lake City, Utah, for VISTA's Native American reservations training program. My friends thought I was crazy for volunteering in the first place. They were convinced of it when they found out I was going to a Native American reservation.

I had no idea what to expect because I had never met a Native American. Like many people, my impressions until then were formed by television and movies. Needless to say, a huge surprise awaited me.

My first real taste of life on the reservation was on a field training exercise on the Wind River Shoshone Reservation in Wyoming. I thought the Native Americans would welcome me as a Soul Brother since we were both members of minority groups that had suffered racial discrimination. My thinking changed the first day when I realized that all of the other trainees—except me—had been placed with local families. When I asked why, my training supervisor told me they were having trouble finding a family to accept the "Colored Trainee."

I was finally placed with a white rancher married to a Shoshone woman. His name was Charlie and I'll never forget him. He and his wife helped me understand why Native Americans didn't trust any non-Native Americans: broken treaties, the use of Black soldiers in the Indian wars of the 1800s, and, ironically, most Native Americans' impressions of blacks were formed from television and media coverage. It was a tough situation, but after a few weeks I began to make friends and was accepted by most of the locals.

Shortly thereafter, I received one of the greatest honors of my life. They invited me to participate in the annual

Sun Dance Ceremony, a sacred event not open to outsiders. The medicine man must bless participants before they erect the sacred lodge where the ceremony will be held. We first cut a sacred pole that would hold the buffalo skull, the focal point of the ceremony. During the four-day event, dancers are not allowed food since it is a purification ceremony designed to strengthen the spirit. It was a very spiritual event for me and helped prepare me for things to come.

> They invited me to participate in the annual Sun Dance Ceremony, a sacred event not open to outsiders.

After training, three of us were assigned to the Nez Perce Reservation in Idaho as community development specialists. Our job was to help local residents develop programs to address problems on the reservation. There was no shortage of problems: high unemployment, high rates of alcoholism, high dropout rates for high school students, and chronic health problems like diabetes.

With only one year to make an impact, we agreed to focus on education and developing opportunities for the youth to pursue their dreams. We implemented remedial reading programs for the elementary school children and an Upward Bound program in cooperation with Washington State University for the secondary school children. Other projects included local participation in a Western Indian Art exhibit at the University of Utah and the publication of the official reservation newsletter, *Coyote Tracks*. We distributed 1,000 copies a month. I also became the assistant scoutmaster of the local Boy Scout troop. As luck would have it, the World Boy Scout Jamboree was held in Farragut, Idaho, in 1967, and our scout troop was able to attend. For many of the kids, the Jamboree marked the first time they had been off the reservation. It was very exciting for them to meet other scouts from around the world.

Over time, I developed many close personal relationships with locals and earned their trust. While there were times when I was referred to as "that Colored," or worse, such labels were rare. Eventually, I was just called "the VISTA."

Social life on the reservation consisted of powwows—gatherings to enjoy traditional activities of dancing, drumming, and playing stick game (a form of gambling)—and rodeos. At most powwows I was the only non-Native American, yet I always felt welcomed. I traveled to many rodeos, including the Pendelton Roundup, an annual rodeo in Oregon that

Clifford Richmond, 1960s

boasts the largest gathering of Native Americans in the United States.

One of my most memorable moments was when Ida Blackeagle, granddaughter of the famous Nez Perce, Chief Joseph, invited me to her home. She shared her recollections of the traditional Nez Perce lifestyle and gave me a pair of beaded moccasins. When that happened, I knew I had been accepted.

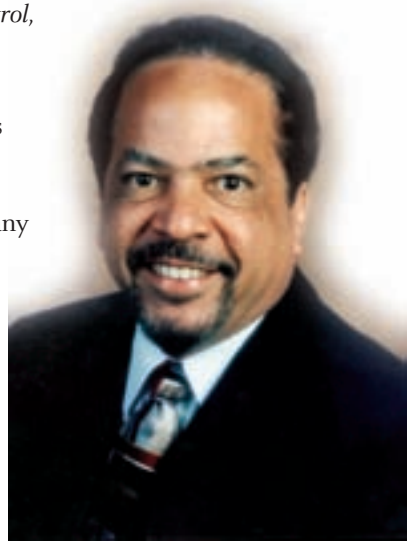
When my year was over, many people asked me to stay for another. But the sense of isolation had been especially acute for me since there were no blacks within 100 miles. While I loved and respected their culture, I yearned to return to mine.

It would be hard to measure the impact of my time on the reservation, but I do know that at least five Native American students enrolled in Upward Bound. I hope they went on to pursue their college degrees. The *Coyote Tracks* newsletter was still circulating three years after I left. Most of all, I am grateful for the opportunities that VISTA provided, allowing me to spend time in a community that I never would have explored.

After leaving the reservation, I spent seven years in various positions with VISTA where I fought for the recruitment of more minorities and for better training and support for volunteers in the field. We succeeded in developing VISTA projects that were staffed by locally recruited volunteers from the communities they served.

During my later career as a health education specialist, I created and managed a national program to educate minority populations about high blood pressure, which brought together health providers from previously underrepresented ethnic communities. These activities were documented and disseminated by the National Institutes of Health's National High Blood Pressure Education Program, long considered an exemplary health promotion program. I also authored *Guidelines for the Use of Volunteers in High Blood Pressure Detection and Control,* published by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health.

My success in these and many other efforts was a direct result of my VISTA experience. For that I will always be grateful. ★



Clifford Richmond, today

the Black Cadillac

VISTA Poster

By Lee Grant—VISTA, 1968-1969, Houston, Texas

Late '60s, Houston, Texas. Tough city. Racially divided city. And there I was, a fledgling VISTA volunteer. It was the year Martin Luther King was killed, the year Eugene McCarthy and George Wallace ran for President.

The Vietnam War and flower power raged. Otis Redding's "(Sittin' on) The Dock of the Bay" and The Doors' "Hello, I Love You" played on the radio.

After training at the University of Oklahoma—I was recruited while a grad student at the University of Oregon—I was assigned to the Latin-American Community (LAC) Project with VISTA volunteers from around the country living and working in Houston's barrios and huge black communities.

The LAC Project was established by the Office of Economic Opportunity as an agency to supervise VISTA volunteers who were building community organizations in poor, underserved Houston neighborhoods. Located in an old, rundown building, VISTAs in Houston gathered there to set strategy, exchange information, and form a support system for each other.

The assignment was opened-ended: Find community leaders, call meetings, identify concerns, chart action. The goal was to leave behind an ongoing, vital community force.

Soon after I arrived, I was dropped off in the black neighborhood of Harrisburg and told, "Go find a place to live." I began strolling the streets, a white kid from Los Angeles with a beard and a mound of curly hair. I thought, "What would my Jewish mother be thinking right now?"

Harrisburg was a small, isolated, sidewalk-less nook of a community not far from Houston's Hobby Airport. It was pocked with old, often dilapidated single-family homes, an adjacent housing project, an elementary school, a Baptist church, and a corner grocery store that charged way more than the supermarket a couple of miles away in the white neighborhood.

I found a roach-infested, partly furnished house, $97.50 a month, and moved in. Now, more than 30 years later, I can recall every room, including the small, showerless bathroom, the tub being the one place for respite from the brutally humid Houston weather. Still, in my mind, I can see the neighbors (one who knocked on my door

Christmas day, holding a plate of food and worrying that I was alone), and the kids who hung at my place making sure I was part of their world and they were part of mine.

Here was a poor community (at least in material things) that took me in, often fed me, watched out for me, befriended me ... and I was there working for them!

During my time in Harrisburg, we formed a community organization that took on the local welfare office, with members acting as monitors when folks with little experience approaching government bureaucracy went there asking questions about eligibility and other concerns. We dealt with youngsters not going to school because they didn't have shoes by visiting organizations like the YMCA or large religious institutions in town, letting them know there were kids without the basics. Response was spotty. We also met with the local school staff, which pretty much shrugged off our concerns as facts of life.

We began a tutoring program that focused mostly on reading. Eventually we corralled a group of white students from a local high school who took it on as an extracurricular club to help Harrisburg youngsters after school.

What I remember are the families who often had barely enough to eat but always put a plate for me at their table, and the kids. Three in particular would knock on my door late at night, a shelter when the black Cadillac pulled up to their gate. When their mother was entertaining a client, she sent them outdoors, away from the indignity of the work she did to support them.

Lee Grant, 1968

Though I was there to impact their lives, those folks and that community had an enormous impact on my life. We stood in line for welfare cheese and beans, at county hospitals for treatment that was patronizing and insensitive, at schools where black kids were never told by counselors they could achieve and be somebody.

> ... those folks and that community had an enormous impact on my life.

Those years, VISTA volunteers in Houston were not supported by the white community or the local politicians. We were stopped and harassed by cops, insulted viciously for living in minority neighborhoods. As a diverse group of Anglos, blacks, and Latinos, we'd be ridiculed and insulted for picnicking together in public parks or having dinner in restaurants. In this big city, we felt safest in our neighborhoods.

The folks there were not always sure why we were there, but glad we were.

During my tenure, a community organization was established and led mostly by young adults, almost all of them women. It worked to not only better the lives of residents but helped this neglected neighborhood emerge from the shadows of city life. Progress was slow. Success meant a Harrisburg person becoming the first black saleswoman at the downtown Neiman Marcus. It meant folks identifying everyday needs ... a used refrigerator for a family without one, visiting the local junior high to discuss why it was always the black kid singled out and sent home after playground scuffles.

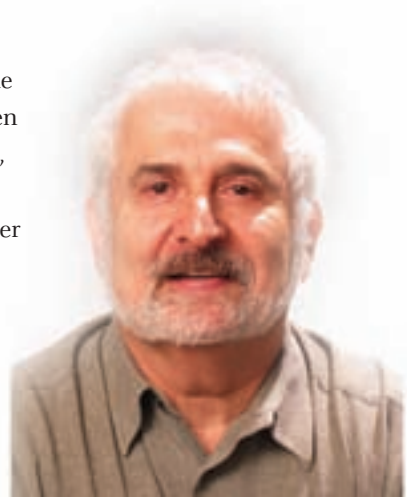
VISTA volunteers participated in a "sensitivity session" with the rough Houston Police Department. We met in a room at police headquarters, suspiciously facing each other. They accused us of being "troublemakers" from the north. We, in turn, came loaded with a backlog of intimidating incidents against folks in our neighborhoods.

The day I left Houston and VISTA, a contingent from Harrisburg followed me to the highway to see me off. I recall looking over my shoulder and noticing that each person had a white handkerchief. They were waving them high so I could see.

They told us during training that if we touched one life, we were successful. I hope I touched at least one. For sure, the people in the community of Harrisburg, Houston, Texas, touched this life.

Since serving in VISTA, I've spent a career in journalism as a reporter and editor (I am the arts editor of the *San Diego Union-Tribune*). I influence the kinds of stories that get into the paper. I pick and choose what I want to write about. I hire people. I spend time with high school kids in the inner city who come to the paper to shadow me. I go to their schools to monitor their work. And, all these years later, that neighborhood, those people, that time, stays in my heart.

My sensibilities, my view of the world, the person I am has been shaped by that Houston, Texas, neighborhood, by the people there, by my time as a Volunteer in Service to America. ★



Lee Grant, today

Full Circle

*By Karalee Marshall—VISTA, 1968-1969, Albuquerque, N.M., and AmeriCorps*VISTA, 2000–2003, Everett, Wash.*

VISTA Poster

I first joined VISTA in 1968: the year of the Beatles, flower children, demonstrations, LSD, marijuana, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy. After graduate school, I could have joined the demonstrations or "dropped out," but I wanted to connect to a dividing nation. I needed to get involved.

That's when a friend told me about a new program. He had just returned from a year's service in VISTA and talked about giving back to the community, of gaining experience and knowledge of himself and the world. I wanted a meaningful, rewarding experience where I could make a difference, grow, and reach out to others. VISTA seemed to fit the bill.

After a week's training in the seedy Tenderloin district of San Francisco and another week in the beautiful Napa Valley wine country, five of us were sent to a Women's Job Corps Center in Albuquerque, N.M., to be resident advisors for the young women living there in an old converted hotel. The women arrived mostly from surrounding states, but included a small group from Hawaii.

The group was predominantly African-American, followed by Hispanic, Caucasian, and Hawaiian. The Job Corps provided education courses so they could get their GED (general equivalency diploma). To help ensure stability for their future, Job Corps also offered training for occupations ranging from secretarial to childcare to store clerks. Some women even attended beauty school. Two of us had teaching credentials and were able to substitute in many of the GED classes.

We spent most of our time with the residents serving as their mentors and confidants. We were expected to interact with them as much as possible. At night, when the head advisor left, it was our responsibility to keep order and watch over the women. There was one security guard on duty and cameras surrounding the building. It was like being in a fortress. All of the inhabitants, except for us, were expected to be in by curfew.

There really was no way we could have been prepared for what we walked into at the center. There was underlying tension at all times; arguments and racial problems were always there, waiting to surface. It was our job to ensure that these did not escalate or erupt. Not an easy task. The atmosphere was unlike anything we had ever experienced. The women we came to know and understand had led lives drastically different from ours. We never had to overcome the barriers of race and poverty. We were not viewed as their equals because we were *privileged*: white, educated, upper class, and free. We had seemingly unlimited access to the world, whereas they were bound by norms and stereotypes.

Over time, the residents did come to respect and accept us as a valuable resource, their friends. I found it amusing that they actually had more money than we did; and were always willing to buy us soda, candy, and other treats. They lived and ate, joked and sang with us, but still we were different. We wanted to include them in our society, but I realize now we actually wanted them to be the same as we were. I naively thought that if they were to accept all we represented, their lives would be fine.

I'm not sure if we made any difference in the world. I'd like to think we did, but I'll never be truly sure. I met a lot of different women, and I hope I helped and inspired more than one. I do know that year made a huge difference in my life. I was never the same person again. That naive young woman was permanently changed. I learned there are others around me who are different, and that is how it should be. I came to appreciate the diversity in our world and never looked at our social system in quite the same way again. Now I am more cognizant of the needs of those around us and the ways we can all give to others. Although a part of me has become a little jaded with time, I still believe in the goodness of people and service.

My VISTA story, however, didn't end in the 1960s. I went on to become a teacher, wife, and mother. After retiring, I saw an advertisement for an AmeriCorps*VISTA position with the Washington Reading Corps, a program that helps struggling readers. I was immediately attracted to the opportunity to promote literacy because literacy and education are things close to my heart.

I do know that year made a huge difference in my life. I was never the same person again.

After becoming an AmeriCorps*VISTA Leader, I helped establish Tutoring and Volunteer Management curriculums and training. My involvement with the United Way, Member Development Institutes, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, AmeriCorps, Points of Light Conference, and local youth committees helped prepare me for these duties. I built partnerships with local businesses that donated capital and materials to help the Washington Reading Corps program, and I recruited volunteers that provided individualized attention to students. I also assisted with community beautification projects, as well as empowered and increased awareness of marginalized groups via the Civic Engagement Program.

My dedication to achieving the Washington Reading Corps goals led to my current position as a co-site supervisor at Lowell Elementary School in Everett, Wash., where I oversee AmeriCorps members who

have volunteered their year of service here. Together, we test, schedule, tutor, recruit, and train adult and peer/cross-age tutors, set up and coordinate an after-school reading program, and involve the parents and the community in all of our events.

What I'm doing is challenging and rewarding. I love every minute of it. When you're in service to others you become a positive force that helps someone attain new levels, levels that would not have been reached without you. Your efforts, no matter how small, can help someone achieve their fullest potential.

While personally satisfying and rewarding, service also adds perspective to struggles and hardships you might encounter. But if you forge ahead with devotion to your cause and your eye on the future, it helps make your service a success.

In many ways, my time serving as a VISTA came full circle. The Kennedys, two of the Beatles, and Martin Luther King, Jr., are gone, and once again our country faces a turbulent time. There are still drugs, racial problems, and young men dying in faraway countries. I still see fear in the eyes of our children. People still go to bed hungry, unable to read or find employment.

I know now, though, that people still work, as I do, to make a difference. As long as we continue enlisting others in service to one another, we will be successful. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, dream has not yet been realized, but we're a little closer. ★

1970–1979

Legacy to Legacy

VISTA Poster

By Ginlin Woo—VISTA, 1968-1972, Seattle, Wash., and Brooklyn, N.Y.

Early in my VISTA experience I organized a community tenants meeting. I spent four weeks knocking on doors to invite residents, asking local groceries to donate refreshments and door prizes, convincing speakers to make an appearance, and translating information into bilingual formats.

And what did I have to show for it? Seven people came to the meeting. Seven! My dreams were dashed. A thick sense of despair engulfed me. I failed.

I was so embarrassed I almost quit VISTA service early. I was ready to do it at our debriefing meeting, right after my VISTA supervisor had his say. While he spoke though, I couldn't believe my ears. He called the tenants meeting "real progress."

Fortunately, my VISTA supervisor, Father Brian J. Karvelis, was much wiser and more grounded than me. He could do this because he held the history and desires of the community before himself, and understood what it took to bring about real, substantive change. For him, the gathering of seven folks that evening to discuss their vision for affordable housing was not "a failure," but real progress made through the efforts of a lot of people, including the dreams and struggles of many tenants that long preceded my arrival. His gentle reframing of my lens helped me understand my place in the work, the struggles, and the history of that community. How he saw it and lived it taught me what I needed to approach my service and work. It's all about honoring the history of a community and joining my legacy with its legacies.

A few months earlier, in the summer of 1968, with one year of college and community-active Asian-American parents as role models, I signed on with VISTA for a summer internship program in my hometown of Seattle. The Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, mounting unrest across U.S. urban communities, and increased student activism on many campuses provided the backdrop to my service. That initial experience with VISTA launched five years of living and serving in Brooklyn, N.Y.

It was an important opportunity for me, not only to serve in the very poor, multicultural, multiethnic communities of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, but also to be coached by a dynamic team of community youth and leaders. They taught me about organizing a community.

They used buzzwords like development, community building, anti-poverty, social justice, and anti-oppression. Whatever words you use, our goal was community empowerment.

Father Karvelis was my main "coach" and VISTA supervisor and teacher. I was privileged to join his team because he had a vision for the community. In fact, he gave the community a vision for itself. Instead of watching Williamsburg crumble, he spoke of development. Instead of living on the welfare rolls, he pushed for community ownership. Instead of apathy, he spoke of mobilizing, leadership, and empowerment. All with a gentle hand because he never wavered in the faith that it could be done. For me, this was truly service and learning at its best.

By day, I served with a team of VISTAs and VISTA lawyers on reforming housing and education litigation. By night, I worked at the Transfiguration Youth Center as a gang counselor, youth program developer, and grant writer. During my years in Brooklyn we tackled problems with a holistic approach. We implemented educational initiatives by establishing a bilingual pre-school, an after-school study club, and enhanced youth programming. We helped the community gain greater control of local schools. Financially, we helped establish a community credit union. We established a community chapel to tackle issues of faith. Youth leaders became peer counselors. A community half-way house helped some get back on their feet. In short, we engaged the community and challenged its citizens to be community advocates.

Ginlin Woo, 1960s

While I worked hard to put in my "24-7," I know that my role was a part of a whole. The legacy passed on to me by community members easily left a far greater imprint on my life than my years of VISTA service left on the community and the many lives I had an opportunity to connect with. My personal perception of poverty, diversity, service, community, compassion, and commitment were defined by the work and passion of community members—a list too long to name. Each of them holds a special place in my heart, especially Father Brian.

For the past number of years, I, along with several beloved colleagues and friends, have been invited to help facilitate and contribute to the preparation and training of AmeriCorps*VISTA supervisors and VISTA members. Paying the legacy forward has translated into the values we instill in new VISTA members, VISTA leaders, and supervisors throughout our training. The sense of pride and purpose, admiration, community connectedness, and hope I have after each training event for VISTA candidates and supervisors has everything to do with the legacy of my VISTA service.

Had my VISTA service never happened, I know I wouldn't have developed in the way that I have. My VISTA service facilitated life choices that included law school and continued volunteer service, both with VISTA and other organizations across the nation. The perceptual lens that Father Brian helped shape so long ago helped me retain my ongoing focus on human relations, diversity, and cross-cultural collaboration. Now, lots of work and many, many cities later, my internal reflections continue to be about addressing issues of poverty and contributing to sustainable strategies. My continued involvement over more than 36 years has allowed my legacy to touch many communities. ★

I See VISTA's Legacy

VISTA Poster

By former Washington Secretary of State, Ralph Munro

While I never served as a VISTA, I've seen firsthand the impact VISTA has had on an entire state. In 1965, a developmentally challenged child was abandoned and placed in a state institution. When I met him in 1966, I was a volunteer in that facility.

The boy had never spoken a word. Everyone thought he never would, but that was unacceptable to me. I had become a volunteer to make a difference in people's lives, so I taught him to speak.

That experience affected me both personally and professionally in ways I wouldn't realize for years. For more than the next three decades, I would serve the state of Washington in several positions, most prominently as the state's longest-tenured Secretary of State. Throughout my career, VISTA contributed to the improvement of our state in many ways.

The story of VISTA's impact on me and our home state begins with the Governor's visit to the facility where I was volunteering and where that little boy lived. He was impressed and complimentary of the breakthrough with the boy. Several weeks later he called me and personally asked me to head downstate to be the state's first volunteer coordinator. Of course, VISTAs made up a portion of the volunteers I was to assist with.

The need for VISTA shined through on one of my first, most challenging, and most memorable projects.

It was the mid-to-late seventies, the Vietnam War was over, and the United States had to find a place for hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Southeast Asia. These were people who had supported the American presence during the war and now faced retribution from a new regime if they remained. Many had fought alongside our troops in Vietnam. Some had even worked for the deposed South Vietnamese government. Now they needed a place to make a new life.

So they fled to the United States, the land of opportunity. Men, women, and children carried all they owned in bags or sacks. For temporary housing, the refugees were sent to Camp Pendleton, north of San Diego, Calif. But they obviously couldn't remain there indefinitely. Washington's Governor, along with the state House and Senate, agreed to resettle many of the refugees in Washington. But it wasn't as easy as saying, "Hey, sure, come live in our state."

We called on VISTA to help. Volunteers set up a temporary settlement camp and worked with other groups to settle refugees in communities throughout the state and find jobs for them. In short, the VISTAs on that project pointed the way for these settlers to rebuild their lives.

Around the time I was elected to my first term as Secretary of State, VISTAs were also confronting the social problems on our Native American reservations. The reservations were in a sorry state—crime was rampant, drug and alcohol abuse was all too frequent, and the tribes were flat broke. None of that deterred the VISTAs. Instead, they focused on fixing the problems.

With so many issues, they decided that getting reservation children through school would be the best place to begin. VISTAs kept the kids in school and set up community and athletic programs. This reestablished community pride and kept many kids off drugs and out of gangs. In turn, crime rates dropped.

Because of all the good work VISTA did in Washington, the Governor wanted volunteerism to grow across the state. Representatives from both sides of the aisle in the statehouse agreed and worked together to develop the Washington Service Corps—kind of like a Washington State VISTA.

During my tenure as Secretary of State, I constantly advocated VISTA or the Service Corps to young people. I wrote letters of recommendation for countless young citizens because I saw this as an incredible opportunity for them. Plus, there's an old saying that it's easier to get a job when you have a job. And VISTAs work 24/7, 365 days a year. The experience and opportunities the program provided have been a boon to the community by helping the volunteers grow and develop careers.

Because of all the good work VISTA did in Washington, the Governor wanted volunteerism to grow across the state.

VISTA has helped us to better serve the people of our state, and it has been an honor and a privilege to see the direct, long-term effect of the VISTA program.

In 1996, I saw VISTA's legacy in the communities where the Vietnamese refugees had settled. As part of the 20th anniversary of their resettlement, I went to high school graduations where the children of refugees were valedictorians of their classes. And their parents were

Ralph Munro, today

no longer "refugees." They were Americans, part of the fabric of their communities.

I see VISTA's legacy when looking at Washington's Native American reservations. The kids who participated in VISTA programs 25 years ago are now the tribal leaders. Those tribes are much better off now and they have a bright future.

I see VISTA's legacy when the Washington Service Corps teaches children to read, responds to natural disasters, or restores our environment. VISTA was not only a catalyst for this in-state program, but the two organizations have also partnered on several occasions.

I see VISTA's legacy in Washington's House of Representatives, in its superior and lower court judges, in its prominent business people, in its hospitals and doctor's offices, as well as in its schools and colleges, because that's where many of those who served in VISTA, and those they helped, now work.

I see VISTA's legacy in the eyes of that boy we taught to speak. He's 40-years-old now, just like VISTA, and I am his legal guardian. Through him I discovered the rewards of volunteering and VISTA—not by serving—but by benefiting from that service in my professional capacity.

VISTA's legacy lives on in communities across Washington and in the people who have made a better life because of it. VISTA's legacy is that it has, without a doubt, made—and continues to make—our state, our country, a better place.

Vietnamese refugees learning to speak English

VISTA Poster

the Job I Was Meant to Have

By Linda A. Sunde—VISTA, 1975-1976, Milwaukee, Wis.

The best thing that ever happened to me was *not* getting into the Peace Corps in 1973. If I had been accepted, I probably would not have served in VISTA, not become the director of a VISTA project, and not found my current post overseeing VISTA and Senior Corps projects in Wisconsin.

For 30 years VISTA has permeated many aspects of my life, changing me in the process. Over the years I have been a VISTA, recruited VISTAs, trained VISTAs, and supervised VISTAs. I even wrote my master's thesis on VISTA. I'm still in national service. My title has changed, but my commitment is the same.

In 1975, VISTA was recruiting locally and I applied to a program in my hometown called Milwaukee Associates in Urban Development. M.A.U.D., as it was known, assigned me to a community organizing project called Milwaukee Alliance of Concerned Citizens, or MACC. I guess we were really into acronyms even then. MACC was an Alinsky-style organization, which means that it took a political activist approach to community organizing. Trainers from the Industrial Areas Foundation, an organization founded by Saul Alinsky and dedicated to supporting community organizing, would come up from Chicago to train us in how to organize people to act for social change.

There were about 40 of us at my pre-service orientation to VISTA, all from the Milwaukee area. In those days you got fingerprinted when you joined VISTA, an intimidating thought when embarking on a career as a social activist. But it was VISTA's 10th Anniversary and everyone thought that was pretty remarkable. We all received a little gold commemorative pin with the VISTA logo, which I still have. A number of the other VISTA trainees are still friends and colleagues.

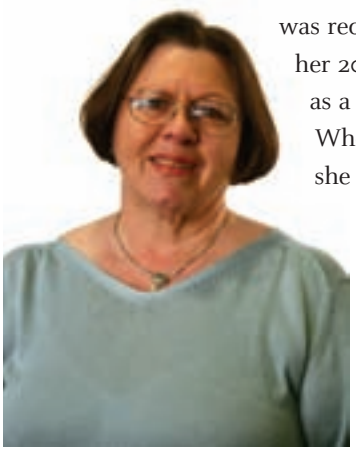
My VISTA assignment at MACC was to provide research on crime statistics and city and county law enforcement budget data for the Older Adult Crime and Safety Committee. I also trained the seniors on doing their own research, writing press releases, and talking to the media, and we role played testifying at government hearings. As a shy kid, I frankly thought this would be the ideal job—just sit in a back room and compile data. I'd been a research assistant for one of my professors in college, so this would be a cinch. Much to my chagrin, I soon became the lead organizer

of the Older Adult Crime and Safety Committee, but it changed my life forever.

I'm not sure we reduced crime much during the year I was a VISTA, but I learned a lot and met some really wonderful people. Working with older adults is a joy. They always want you to stay and visit, and they always want to feed you! I especially remember Sister Margaret Shekelton, who was the chair of the committee. She was a fierce advocate for justice, but with a gentle dignity that won over our opponents. Whenever we met, it was always over tea.

I tell people that this is the job I was meant to have.

As Alinsky-style organizers, we had been trained that the organizers are not out front as leaders or spokespersons. Our job was to empower others to leadership roles. This and other lessons have continued to guide my work in community service over the years. Several of the women on the committee who had been pretty shy about testifying or talking to reporters became seasoned pros by the time I left. A few years ago I attended a Retired and Senior Volunteer Program recognition in Milwaukee and discovered that one of the women I had worked with was receiving an award for her 20 plus years of service as a Court Watch volunteer. When I introduced myself she didn't remember me specifically, but did remember the VISTA project and credited it with getting her started as a Court Watch volunteer. I tell that story now when I speak to AmeriCorps*VISTAs at trainings and elsewhere to illustrate that it might take more than 20 years for them to realize they made a difference in someone's life.



Linda A. Sunde, today

Within a year of ending my VISTA service, I was tapped to become a VISTA supervisor with M.A.U.D. About a year later I was named executive director of the organization and stayed there for about 15 years. The VISTA program at M.A.U.D. was a prototype for consortium projects around the country. The organization did most of its own recruiting, placement, training, supervision, and program administration for its VISTA components, acting as a sort of mini state office. Not everyone in ACTION liked the concept, but it worked. My master's thesis on VISTA used the M.A.U.D. program as a model. It was later published as "VISTA as Experiential Education," in *Experiential Education for Community Development*, in 1989.

Nearly every day I run into someone who was a VISTA with that program. They are running community groups, holding elective office, teaching, organizing, and generally making their mark on the world. I am struck by the number of former VISTAs in some type of community service work. Their stories are similar to mine: VISTA changed the direction of their lives. Coming to work at the Corporation for National and Community Service in 1998 was the culmination of my VISTA journey that began in the early 1970s. Becoming the Wisconsin State Director was like coming home. I tell people that this is the job I was meant to have. ★

VISTA Poster

Directions in Life

By Hope Horowitz—VISTA, 1977-1978, Atlanta, Ga.

While I was in college, the idea of VISTA service was always in the back of my mind, but I never followed through. Instead, as I prepared to graduate, I sent out over 100 resumes. I didn't get one interview! Finally, I decided to give VISTA a shot. That decision changed my life.

In August 1977, VISTA offered me a position with the Atlanta Youth Development Center for male adjudicated delinquent youth. The boys at the development center were there for transgressions ranging from shoplifting to assault. Most came from broken homes. The Center housed children as young as eight and even had lockdown units for those who had committed more serious offenses. I accepted their offer.

All new VISTAs placed in the state attended a training session on an island off Georgia's coast. I vividly remember one activity called Mutts and Lipps. While I didn't understand how to do it, somehow I loved it! Years later, I realized why. It was *experiential education*, a teaching style based on reflection and critical analysis of experiences. The activity stimulated and challenged me to look at myself and learn from my experience. The roots of my love for training began at that moment. The experience I got through the youth development center was going to help it grow.

The Center was there to provide structure, limits, and love for the kids. Along with another VISTA, Tom Seely, my mission was to create a volunteer program to provide positive role models for the boys. We brainstormed, learned about the needs of volunteers, and how to train and recruit volunteers. We were determined to find people who would serve as positive role models for these troubled youth. We sought adults who had a passion for children and would help build their self-esteem. Tom and I went into the community to enlist volunteers, male and female, from all over Atlanta.

Over the course of the year, we created a volunteer department with a strong training program and a dedicated core of volunteers who spent time with the youth. We created a manual that explained the Center's rules and guidelines, and provided tips for working with children. We also implemented training sessions for skills, such as effective listening. The volunteers spent time with the kids, provided a positive role

model, gave them individualized attention and took part in activities with them like reading, playing games, helping with homework, and sports.

It was not easy and sometimes the frustration of reality reared its ugly head. We were unsure if there would really be a long-term impact on the kids. We wondered if we were really making a difference in their lives. Would they return to the same negative influences at home? Would they return to their deviant behavior? But with determination, perseverance, and dedication, we supported each other and a strong, vibrant volunteer program was in place by the end of our year. We had developed personal relationships with many of the kids by visiting the units and engaging in activities with them. For the volunteers, making a difference could be as simple as having a child smile or say thank you! The consistent visits and relationships with positive adult role models at least mattered while the kids were at the Atlanta Youth Development Center. Making a difference came in small ways and we learned to appreciate these small changes.

> VISTA touches the heart and soul of those who serve and I will never forget the impact that one year had on my entire life ...

The VISTAs also supported and relied on each other because money was always tight. In order to have a social life, we even volunteered for fun. The beautiful Fox Theatre in Atlanta always needed help, so a group of VISTAs volunteered as ushers on a regular basis. We were rewarded with a year of free cultural experiences ranging from The Rolling Stones to ballet and opera. We missed our families, and sometimes doubted ourselves, but underlying all that was our work as VISTAs, our commitment to making a difference. We were all patriotic. Serving our country was important to us. So we worked to make it a better place. If we could change just one life it would help make our country, and the world, stronger.

Hope Horowitz and Tom Seeley, 1978

As if that weren't enough, midway through my VISTA appointment at the development center, I started volunteering as an advisor for the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, a Jewish group for teens in grades 9-12, but at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Youth Development Center. While the Center had mostly black kids from broken homes, the youth from the B'nai B'rith organization were Jewish teens from healthier, supportive environments. Imagine my surprise when I discovered very little difference between the groups. I learned that no matter where

you are, adolescents experience the same trials growing up, such as self identity, sexuality issues, and apprehension about the future. This allowed me to implement a lot of the strategies I learned through the Youth Development Center with the Jewish youth organization.

My strategies impressed the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization so much that they asked me to teach leadership training at the International Leadership Training Conference—a prestigious training for the top 200 B'nai B'rith Youth Organization leaders from around the world—upon completion of my one year VISTA assignment. It was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. My VISTA experience seamlessly translated into the skills I taught the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization leaders. It prepared me to take what I learned and teach it to others with real-world examples. At the end of the conference, they offered me a job with the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization in Michigan where I spent two years until my position was eliminated.

The organization then provided a scholarship for me to obtain a Masters of Social Work (MSW) from the University of Michigan. Two years later I relocated to Allentown, Pa., where I spent the next 14 years with the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, the last eight years as Assistant Director of the Jewish Community Center.

My VISTA training set me on my path to teach and train others. My VISTA experience set me on my career path and enabled me to gain invaluable insights about myself, groups, and working with communities. I hold my VISTA experience so dear that I still keep a rock that was part of an activity as a reminder of it. VISTA touches the heart and soul of those who serve, and I will never forget the impact that one year had on my entire life and the lives of the youth we served. ★

Hope Horowitz, today


Don't hang up your skills... VISTA needs them.
Games of the XXIIIrd Olympiad Los Angeles 19
CNN
1980-1989
AMERICORPS
VISTA

VISTA Poster

an Unexpected Romance

By Liz Bryan—VISTA, 1980-1981, St. Paul, Minn.

My husband, David, and I were the first VISTAs in Minnesota to meet and marry on the job. When we became VISTAs, however, we weren't looking for romance.

David had already been on the job for six months at United Handicapped Federation, a grassroots action group serving the disabled community in the Twin Cities. When I arrived that July morning in 1980, after the director introduced us, he asked David to show me around the office. Right away, I thought there was something special about David. Both of us were shy, and it would take some time before we really got to know each other.

Before our VISTA assignments, David had been an accountant in St. Paul and I was an English teacher in Minneapolis. Each of us had come to a point in our lives and careers that we wanted to try something different. Because we were both disabled, David with MS and I with a hip injury that made walking difficult, we knew our employment options might be somewhat limited. Coincidentally, we were steered toward VISTA—and the same job site—by vocational counselors, who suggested that signing up as VISTAs might be a good opportunity to use our skills in new ways and also serve our country.

It was an exciting time at the United Handicapped Federation, and we loved the work. Although there were (and are) always those who thought people with disabilities ought to stay out of sight, members of the Federation made a point of making noise. They formed several committees to work on the most pressing issues faced within the disabled community. The issues included accessible transportation, building accessibility, employment, health care, and aging. It was up to David, me, and four other VISTA community organizers to work behind the scenes with Federation members.

We assisted them in a variety of ways, ever sensitive to the fact that disabled people, like so many minorities, must not be lumped together into one group. Each is an individual, each with his or her own ideas. Conflicts often arose about the best methods to achieve our goals. Everyone agreed, however, that our first priority was to educate the public. We wanted people to know that the issues of the disabled were immediate and urgent. And these issues could affect anyone at any age, at any instant—a motorcyclist without a helmet suffers brain damage after an accident, a factory worker loses a

limb to machinery, a child is paralyzed by a fall from a diving board, a senior citizen is blinded by macular degeneration.

We VISTAs helped Federation members organize public demonstrations at the state capitol in St. Paul. We prepared members for interviews with the media. Not only did we alert the media to cover these events, we also made sure that some of our Federation members, with a little coaching from us, were readily available for interviews and pictures, up close and personal. One newspaper photo showed a wheelchair-bound citizen sitting in front of the stairs to a public building in mid-winter. The image spoke volumes. A television news crew truly benefited the cause by interviewing a man with a speech impediment who was turned down for a job despite his fine qualifications. Such publicity began to make a difference.

Liz and David Bryan, 1980s

Meanwhile, as David and I worked hard on the job at the Federation, we began seeing each other outside the office. Unsure whether VISTA staffers at the same job site were supposed to date, we kept our romance under wraps.

In 1981, shortly before our VISTA terms concluded, David and I surprised everyone at the office by announcing that we had just been married. Once the news was out, we learned that we were the first VISTAs in Minnesota to meet and marry on the job. To celebrate this occasion, the state VISTA office held a reception in our honor.

At the same time there was a personnel upheaval at the Federation. As soon as David completed his VISTA commitment, the board at the Federation invited him to take over as director of the organization. He accepted. David supervised the staff, including the other VISTAs, and as soon as my VISTA term ended, I joined the Federation as employment seminars coordinator. We continued in these positions for two more years, always working toward the primary goal of the Federation: equal rights for the disabled.

Satisfied we were leaving the organization in good hands, David and I resigned from the United Handicapped Federation in 1983 to find new challenges. For three years we ran our own small bookstore until our business failed. David went to work at another local bookstore, and I was hired to direct recruitment for a large research project in the Psychology Department at the University of Minnesota.

The years passed and our VISTA experience faded into the past, remembered with fondness but no longer part of our everyday thoughts.

Then in 1998, David died of cancer. At his memorial service, several people spoke of the great service he had rendered to the disabled community over the years, and the memories came flooding back. I thought of how David and I had met as VISTAs at the Federation and worked together for common goals.

Society often resists change and at times we found ourselves in the midst of turmoil.

David and I never expected our terms as VISTAs to be a piece of cake—and they weren't. Society often resists change and at times we found ourselves in the midst of turmoil. Any frustrations we felt, however, were far outweighed by our sense of satisfaction when we noted concrete evidence of change. During our VISTA terms, architects and contractors began to seek out Federation members for advice on how to reshape entrances into buildings, widen restroom doors, and remove barriers from public grounds.

Later, as we watched the development and implementation of a vastly improved metropolitan transit system that finally accommodated people with disabilities, we remembered all the Federation members in wheelchairs gathered in front of the state capitol. "We Will Ride!" said their placards. And we were elated when we learned that an employer decided to hire one of our members on the spot—a woman with cerebral palsy—after he heard her eloquent description of the subtle discrimination she had faced when seeking a job.

Although the United Handicapped Federation disbanded in the mid-1990s, there will probably always be a need for advocacy for those in the disabled community whose quality of life is threatened. And 25 years later, I recall with much joy how deeply David and I savored our VISTA experience at the Federation. I wish that every citizen could experience a similar opportunity to serve our country. In some small way, I think David and I made a difference. ★

Liz Bryan, today

Reality Declared

By Rep. Gwendolynne Moore—VISTA, 1981-1984, Milwaukee, Wis.

VISTA Poster

As a resident of a poor, inner-city environment with a predominantly minority population, you can either live the reality that there's little you can do about it or you can declare what your reality will be and make it happen. As a VISTA volunteer, my colleagues and I chose to create a new reality.

I already knew what it was like to live in the Midtown neighborhood of Milwaukee because I was a lifelong resident. The local economy and residents suffered the financial backlash common in poverty-stricken areas—redlined financial products, loans and insurance at unreasonable rates, unfair retail pricing structures, no local bank branches, and businesses that crumbled and closed.

As a board member of the Midtown Neighborhood Association, we had identified the lack of banking resources as a key element in the decline of our neighborhood. The message was clear. Institutions were not investing in the neighborhoods around me and opportunities commonly available elsewhere were pipe dreams. Without community resources, Midtown would be left further behind. My neighborhood group realized the community needed a local financial institution to provide a foundation on which to build a stable future.

So the association board asked that I become a VISTA and organize a financial empowerment initiative. When I was sworn in, I saw a VISTA poster that aptly defined my stewardship. It declared "We will either find a way, or make one," and making a way became my personal mantra. Our project was to establish the Cream City Community Development Credit Union to offer basic banking, as well as loans, for projects that created jobs, cultivated local businesses, and contributed to the development of Milwaukee's inner city.

It took a lot of hard work to get Cream City going because we had to start from scratch. We didn't have staplers, pens, or paper clips, which really didn't matter because we didn't have paper or desks, either. Obviously, the first thing we had to do was equip ourselves, so we begged, borrowed, and negotiated rock bottom prices for everything. We got a huge boost from a relocating hospital, which supplied a lot of the furniture we needed, while other organizations donated the necessary supplies. My colleagues and I put in the

time by working almost every night, weekend, and holiday.

In early November of my first year, we learned about a federal government loan we could get that would provide some operating capital. The only problem was that the November 30 application deadline was less than a month away. Excited by the prospect of funding, we worked day and night pulling together the necessary documentation and forms. Finally, that Thanksgiving, we gathered around my dining room table to put the finishing touches on the business plan and application between bites of turkey and cranberry sauce. It's still one of my fondest holiday memories because our diligence paid off—we got the $10,000 capitalization loan.

We got the loan, but we were just getting started. To prove the viability of the institution, we had to prove that it would be used by the residents of the community. By going door-to-door, we got residents to pledge to open an account with us. The minimum account opening balance had to be $50, which was a lot of money for a community where the majority of people were on welfare. But we got enough to prove that Cream City would be a valued community commodity.

> "We will either find a way, or make one," and making a way became my personal mantra.

We also had to put together committees and generate support from professionals willing to volunteer their time. It was hard, but we finally opened Cream City's doors, and, while it certainly didn't happen overnight, I was mesmerized by the effect it had on the community. It enabled people to start thinking about building assets instead of just making ends meet.

Gwendolynne Moore, 1980s

People could now invest in the community by getting a home or small business loan, then give back to the community by hiring residents or improving their small part of the neighborhood.

The community flourished and buzzed with activity as our service became contagious. There was a local bar and grill called the Interlude where we often gathered to discuss our next course of action. By publicly holding meetings and discussions, people saw what we did and either wanted to be a part of it or take on projects of their own. Groups formed that eventually brought in a coin-operated laundry and a health clinic. This all led to housing development and an improved quality of life. Other businesses followed,

the community developed a new pride, and the neighborhood experienced a renaissance.

Too many people believe that where you start out dictates where you end up. That didn't happen to me, and it shouldn't happen to anyone. VISTA, or what's now known as AmeriCorps*VISTA, is what made the difference for me and the community where I grew up. Now, more than 20 years later, the Midtown area is thriving, growing, and proud. And it was the Cream City Federal Credit Union that led the way for this poor inner-city community to take control of its destiny. Cream City eventually morphed into another institution, and today my family still does its banking there.

U.S. Rep. Gwendolynne Moore, today

Through my VISTA experience, I learned the value of self-help, coalition building, interracial cooperation, and mobilization. I gained self-confidence, patience, and faith, as well as financial, networking, and organizational skills. Above all, I realized that great things can be accomplished with the collective strength of community, thus strengthening my commitment to community service. Now I serve on the Financial Services Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives and have the opportunity to make a direct impact on the conditions I observed during my service. Without my VISTA service, I doubt I would have been able to attain this position.

But my VISTA service wasn't about empowering me, it was about empowering the people and the community. For example, my service had a marked effect on my daughter, Jessalynne, and my other two children. I took them with me to my meetings, so they grew up seeing and hearing and learning what it takes to make the world a better place just a little bit at a time. That's where my legacy intermingles with VISTA's because Jessalynne also joined VISTA to serve homeless children, and she did a fantastic job. But that is her story to tell, not mine.

My VISTA legacy is that through service, I left a footprint. Jessalynne left another and thousands of other VISTAs left theirs. Given that, we are not VISTA's legacy of service. Projects like Cream City Community Development Credit Union serve as that legacy. Why? Because they blaze the trail that others will follow. And that trail leads the way out of poverty. ★

VISTA Poster

In My Back Yard

By George D. Weber—VISTA, 1982-1984, Pacific, Mo.

"Not in My Back Yard." That was the battle cry among my neighbors when, as a real estate broker, I helped locate a medium-security prison complex in Pacific, Missouri. That didn't exactly endear me to the community.

But because I was instrumental in bringing Missouri Eastern Correctional Center to the area, I wanted to help make it the best prison in Missouri. So when it finally opened and advertised for a VISTA to manage Volunteer in Corrections, a volunteer program designed to encourage offenders to take responsibility for their actions, I saw it as a great opportunity. I applied and was accepted.

Most of the prison staff was new to corrections when it opened, so we all had a lot to learn. Originally, the prison housed about 1,000 inmates in single occupancy cells. The inmates were high-medium security risks. When I could, I even assisted the new prison staff as an unofficial correction officer, filling in when an absence occurred. My role was to recruit, train, and supervise new community volunteers who would steer offenders toward success and focus on accountability, protection of the community, and competency development. I also protected volunteers from prisoners intent on preying on the sympathy of well-meaning volunteers. I was popular among the inmates because they recognized the value of the Volunteer in Corrections program.

Most of my volunteers came from interested church groups. I tried to recruit people who would serve the inmates' needs and help them improve themselves. One of those needs, surprisingly, included a bridge group. There was a group of prisoners who played bridge in their spare time, so I asked an outside bridge group to join them. They brought their excellent card talent to the prisoners and everyone had a great time. Another activity among inmates was called "talking books," in which inmates would tape record books for the blind. A few volunteers came to assist and provide advice in their efforts.

My VISTA work got a big boost through Prison Fellowship, a group developed by Charles "Chuck" Colson, a man who worked for President Nixon. In 1974 Chuck entered a guilty plea to Watergate-related charges and served time in prison. While incarcerated, he found religion and founded Prison Fellowship in 1976. In collaboration with all religions, Prison Fellowship has become the world's largest outreach to

prisoners, crime victims, and their families. The Fellowship movement has built a working relationship with more than 40,000 prison ministry volunteers. Since most of my volunteers came from religious organizations, his influence helped my recruiting efforts. He even honored us by making a personal appearance at the prison to recognize the inmates and volunteers for their good work.

As a Catholic, I noticed the Catholic faith was not heavily represented in the prison's faith-based programs, so I made contact with Archbishop John May of St. Louis. He responded by calling on a group of Catholics who became active. After a year of work, the Archbishop visited and said Mass in our chapel for interested prisoners and volunteers. We became close friends for the effort.

Of the 750 or so religious volunteers, I believe the Nation of Islam was the most constructive in their work. Their message was not tilted toward sorrow for the situation in which the inmates found themselves, but geared to betterment by being responsible for each individual's actions.

Influenced by Volunteer in Corrections programs, prisoners began proposing constructive programs of their own. The inmates proposed a "Scared Straight" type of program called "Youth Awareness." Developed by the prisoners and approved by the administration, it involved 12 to 15 inmates who used their experiences to try to "scare straight" young offenders. The chairman of the group was doing 25 life terms and the others were almost as bad, so they had a lot to offer. During the program, they scared the kids pretty good. The only thing I can say with certainty is the inmates got the kids' attention. I hope none of those kids fell into a life of crime after that.

George D. Weber, 1980s

During my VISTA service, the prison administration nominated me for two volunteer awards and the United Way and the JC Penney Group recognized our work. I served for two one-year terms as a VISTA and when the program was not extended, I was hired as a State Corrections Officer, where I stayed until I retired.

So here I am, 80 years old and still not finished. Following retirement, I got involved in politics again (I was a Missouri State Representative in the mid-sixties), believing I could help in other ways. I ran for several state and federal offices between 1996 and 2004. More recently, AmeriCorps asked me to be a district "Community Outreach Representative," working career days at St. Louis area universities. At St. Louis University and Washington University, I distributed about 3,000 pieces of literature.

I credit VISTA with a lot of things. Through their efforts, we turned a "Not in my backyard" battle cry into a community of volunteers willing to help convicted criminals right in their backyard. And we saw results—communities that help rather than turn a blind eye toward issues behind prison walls, a prison where criminals learn to hold themselves accountable for their actions, and prisoners who reach out to help the community. If VISTA service can do this in my backyard, I think it can help in anyone's backyard. ★

VISTA Poster

Shooting Up

By Donna Shapiro Rabiner—VISTA, 1982-1983, Providence, R.I.

As a small child, Alice had been sexually abused by her father. By age 16, she had become a heroin addict. "Shooting up," she said, "was the only way I knew how to dull the pain and shame of living at home."

Alice went to Marathon House, a two-year residential program in Providence, R.I., designed to help first-time substance abuse offenders learn how to stay free of controlled substances. It was then Alice became part of my life as my closest colleague.

Through her experience at Marathon House, Alice gained self-esteem, returned to school, and earned her high school equivalency diploma. By the time I arrived there as a VISTA volunteer, she worked part-time in the Marathon House central office. My time at Marathon House exposed me to many experiences and individuals that had not been a part of my life. And although Alice did not have the educational background that I was fortunate to obtain through college, she taught me quite a bit about living through difficult times, fighting for a better life, and struggling to make ends meet while supporting a small child as a single parent.

I was extremely fortunate to be able to work with a bright, energetic, idealistic, and optimistic group of people who believed in the potential of every human being and worked to ensure that those brave enough to stick to the program were given a second lease on life. The Marathon House program was rigorous—individuals had to work or go to school, attend a number of therapy sessions each week, stay drug-free, commit to changing their destructive behaviors, try to rebuild relationships with family, and plan for life after they graduated from the program. More importantly, if they failed the program, they went to jail.

My one-year assignment at Marathon House opened my eyes. The experience made me realize that I really could "make a difference." Through my VISTA appointment as a research assistant, I developed an Employee Assistance Program to help coach employees of the greater Providence area who either had a substance abuse problem or had a relative with this problem. The program provided counseling services, confidential assessments and referrals to community providers, in addition to a supportive environment. I also succeeded in evaluating the benefit of the program by developing and conducting a mail survey with program participants, both drop outs and graduates.

Respondents were one of two types of individuals—dropouts who disliked the program and did not graduate (and were happy to tell us their stories about that!) or graduates who went on to lead healthy, productive lives.

Although I was able to help Marathon House evaluate its program, I had a long way to go before I could provide the agency with a rigorous assessment of the program's strengths and weaknesses. Without additional training, I could only provide Marathon House and other non-profit agencies with information that would partially help improve their programs. So I went to graduate school at Duke University and earned a master's degree in Health Administration and a doctorate in Health Policy and Administration.

I learned how to balance a budget, deal with personnel issues, handle complex financial matters, evaluate the supply/demand for services, delve into health law, and learn how to plan and develop new health programs. I also learned that I did not want to work in a for-profit health care setting given my values, my VISTA experience at Marathon House, and the tremendous satisfaction that I obtained from helping people during a difficult time in their lives.

Donna Shapiro Rabiner, Today

After my years at Duke, I continued to work in the health field. I held several positions at a non-profit health maintenance organization, and now I'm a senior researcher at RTI International, where I have become fascinated with the role and importance of volunteering in later life.

During the past five years, I have evaluated many programs funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, including the Senior Companion Program and the Experience Corps for Independent Living Initiative. In addition, I have analyzed data from AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (AmeriCorps*NCCC) members. It was very interesting to compare my reasons for joining VISTA in 1982 with those of volunteers who joined the AmeriCorps program in 2000.

It was a pleasure and a delight to work with the Corporation—the very same agency (under its early aegis of ACTION) that helped me grow up and determine my life's work. In the years to come, I will continue to use my skills and training from both my schooling and my empowering experience as a VISTA volunteer to help serve others, to assess the impact of community-based programs on the health and well-being of volunteers, clients, and communities being served, and to encourage others to serve in a similar way.

My first year out of college as a VISTA volunteer helped shape who I am as an adult. VISTA helped me recognize that I wanted to focus my life on serving others and gave me the confidence to pursue a career in community-based evaluation research, a path that has been rewarding, extremely satisfying, and especially meaningful for me, and, I believe, to others. ★

1990-1999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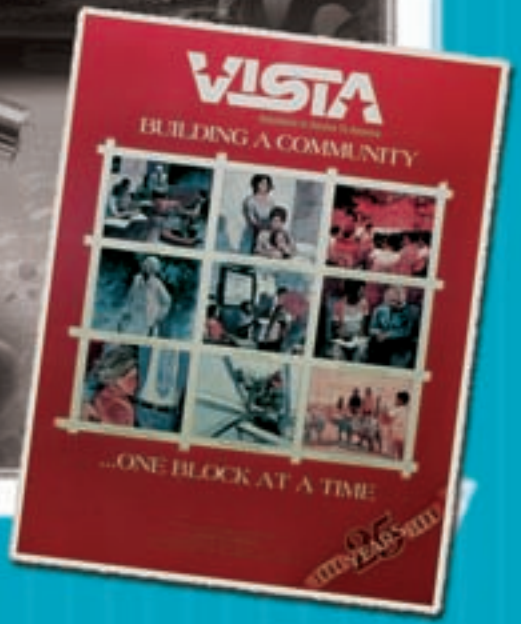

VISTA
BUILDING A COMMUNITY
...ONE BLOCK AT A TIME
25 YEARS

Just Getting Warmed Up

By Ray Wright—VISTA, 1990-1993, Detroit, Mich.

Through the AmeriCorps*VISTA program, I experienced life-changing events. For that I am grateful. In fact, I believe I'm living testimony to AmeriCorps*VISTA's national importance and continued necessity.

VISTA Poster

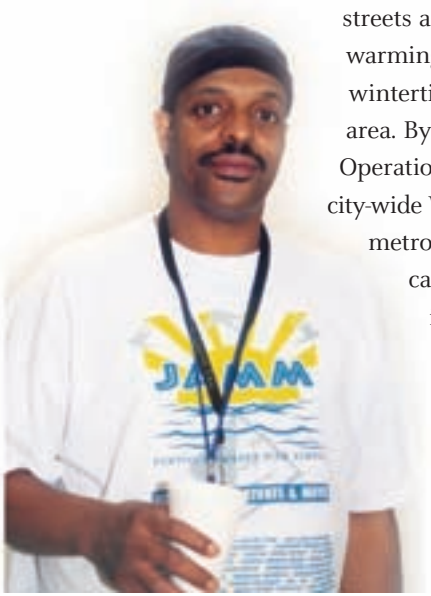
By teaching technical, communications, and networking skills to those who would never get a chance to rebuild their self-confidence and community infrastructures, AmeriCorps*VISTA serves as a "mender" of the breach in our nation's safety net. I congratulate AmeriCorps*VISTA on 40 years of excellence in mentoring and cultivating the dormant energies and aspirations inside America's grass-root organizations.

I am the eldest of eight children, and as a child I excelled in school and athletics. But because of family structural breakdowns, parental alcoholism, molestation, and physical abuse, I lost my edge, dropped out of high school, and joined the U.S. Army in 1970 at age 17.

By 1974, I was a 21-year-old African-American male, with a family of four, no education, and no clear career path. What was I going to do? How could I take care of my family? I eventually had to get on welfare with my family, but I was trying to find a way to get ahead. This time in my life was the beginning of more than 15 years of crisscrossing the country in search of better work, education, and career opportunities to help me take care of my family.

In 1990, I ended up back in Detroit as a community outreach coordinator at Operation Get Down, a grass-roots Pan-African social service agency, where I had earned a GED (general equivalency diploma) in 1975. In addition to GED assistance, Operation Get Down identifies self-help solutions in the Detroit community, offers shelter and support to the homeless, designs youth development programs, and coordinates family emergency services. After a year at Operation Get Down, I became a VISTA member at the organization's Warming Center, where homeless clients were served a hot meal and given sleeping accommodations for the night.

Between 1990 and 1993, at least 75,000 people had been cut from the welfare roles, and another 50,000 had been released from mental hospitals throughout Michigan. These two acts alone swelled the population of homeless residents in Detroit to an estimated 10,000. One of my VISTA duties was to drive a van around town to pick up homeless adults and children off the



Ray Wright, 1990s

streets and transport them to our warming facility when freezing wintertime temperatures hit the area. By the second year of Operation Get Down's expanded city-wide Warming Center program, metro Detroit residents were calling us "The Brothers in the Vans."

Richard Trice, Operation Get Down's Deputy Director and my VISTA supervisor, had a vision to take helping the homeless to an unprecedented level. He wanted to create a place where homeless clients could receive comprehensive services 24 hours a day, rebuilding the community "one life at a time." Thus, Nia House was established, and I was reassigned there through the VISTA program as a residential liaison and advocate for residents' rights.

At Nia House (Nia means purpose in Swahili), the largest transitional housing unit in Michigan at that time, we helped rebuild lives from the ground up, but this was no free ride. Residents had to clean their rooms, bathe daily, and perform duties around the house, such as painting, cutting grass, plastering, sweeping, mopping, and helping prepare meals. The community gained a sense of pride and respect for the Nia House residents, who had found something worth living for—self-respect.

Counselors admitted residents into Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous programs, sent qualified residents to GED programs, helped them with medical problems, and helped them find employment. Nia House fed 144 residents, both men and women, daily. Through my AmeriCorps*VISTA tenure, I witnessed Operation Get Down saving hundreds, if not thousands, of lives. We found people under bridges and in hallways; we picked up women and children freezing in the dead of winter, and men and women decimated by drug use. We saved victims of domestic violence by securing warm, safe surroundings by making sure they got help to realign their lives, and by giving them a hot meal.

Years later, it is humbling to encounter former residents of Nia House walking downtown, or at the bus stop, or in a Westside market, and hear them say, "Thank you, Brother Wright. The Nia House experience helped save my life."

The Nia House helped change the way many politicians viewed the homeless problem in Michigan and revitalized efforts against homelessness. Twelve years later, it has helped reduce the number of Detroit's homeless by half.

> ... I witnessed Operation Get Down saving hundreds, if not thousands, of lives.

Although I left Nia House and VISTA in 1993, I am still actively involved in grass-roots community development and urban design activities. Following the death of my 22-year-old daughter in 1998, I wanted to create a program to help children combat drug abuse and child molestation. So I engaged the same networking and communications skills that I used as an AmeriCorps*VISTA member to start the Just Aim Motivate and Move (JAMM) Project,

which features an after-school and summer program where inner-city youth learn computer technology and engage in physical activity, cultural enrichment, and economic enrichment education.

The AmeriCorps program at Oakland University in Pontiac, Mich., has been a strong partner of the JAMM mission and its projects. During the past seven years, the AmeriCorps Oakland has helped recruit hundreds of manpower hours for our JAMM Session, an annual fundraiser that involves having fun through games and lots of showmanship on the basketball court.

This past December, the JAMM Project was honored at the 10-year celebration of AmeriCorps Oakland. Through the JAMM Project, AmeriCorps Oakland has served thousands of youth and their parents across the Pontiac and metro Detroit area.

All of these can be traced back to 1991 when VISTA helped train me and set the path for me to acquire cross networking experiences over the years.

Thank you, AmeriCorps*VISTA. I hope there will be many more decades of unmatched service to this great nation. ★

Ray Wright, today

the Story's the Thing

VISTA Poster

*By Quinn Dalton—AmeriCorps*VISTA, 1994-1995, Greensboro, N.C.*

I'm a writer, and reading is one of my favorite activities. I was the kid whose nose was always in a book as my parents drove by fabulous scenery on family vacations, begging me to look. Reading has always been my escape, my reward when my work is done.

So when I joined VISTA, I chose to work in literacy. I couldn't imagine living without reading, not just for pleasure but also simply to function in society. Then I met intelligent, amazingly resourceful people like Tom.

Tom was a long-distance truck driver, and he couldn't read. His wife of 20 years didn't know; she planned all his routes for him so he would have more time to relax when he was home. When she went on trips with him, she navigated.

Then one time Tom got lost—I don't remember in which city. He panicked—maybe it was the traffic or the tons of signs that he couldn't understand—and he turned the wrong way down a one-way street. He stood on the brake when he realized his mistake.

A policeman saw what he'd done and pulled up beside him. He didn't write a ticket. He gave Tom directions and sent him on his way.

After that, Tom called Reading Connections, a nonprofit adult literacy program in Greensboro, N.C. He'd heard about it though his church. There had been an announcement to recruit volunteer tutors. He was matched with a tutor (not from his church, because he didn't want anyone to know) and started meeting as often as his travel schedule allowed. He did workbook exercises while on the road.

Tom didn't have a learning disability, as so many adults who have trouble with reading do. Nationally, an estimated one in five adults struggle with the most basic literacy tasks. Tom had just fallen behind one year in school and never caught up. He was a nice kid; the teachers kept passing him. As an adult, he'd always been a reliable worker, a quick study. It was the same story when he started learning to read.

After about six months, a strange thing started happening: words began leaping out at him from street signs, billboards, and buildings. Before, the world had been composed of colors and shapes. Now it spoke to

him everywhere he looked. It was almost frightening, this switch that had flipped in his brain, but he loved it. He couldn't believe how much he'd missed; he said he felt he'd spend the rest of his life just catching up.

There are so many inspiring stories like Tom's that I came to know during my year as a VISTA: the woman who got tired of having other people writing her checks for her; the warehouse worker who kept getting fired for not filling out paperwork.

It wasn't hard to love being part of an organization that had such a huge and meaningful impact on people's lives. And it was especially gratifying to work in Greensboro, a town I thought I'd live in for just the two years it would take me to complete a graduate degree. When I applied to VISTA, I said on my application that I'd go anywhere they wanted to place me, because I thought I needed to experience another part of the country. It turned out I found that other part of the country six blocks away from my student apartment. I met people I never would have met in my safe, simple academic world. And I don't just mean people like Tom, but also people who cared enough to volunteer, and business leaders who understood that by investing in Reading Connections, they were investing not only in improving workers' skills and their quality of life, but also in the health of our community.

Quinn Dalton, today

I served with VISTA from 1994-1995 as Reading Connections' community awareness coordinator. Then I stayed on part time for another year, continuing to help with awareness and fundraising. The experience helped me to develop so many useful skills, which prepared me for later work in public relations as well as in writing (I am the author of a novel, *High Strung*, and a story collection, *Bulletproof Girl*, which was released in April 2005; both from imprints of Simon & Schuster). At Reading Connections, I learned how to write a press release and to pitch media for coverage of events and agency successes. I learned how to plan fundraising events, from invitations to table arrangements.

I learned how to speak in front of many kinds of groups, tailoring our message to their interests. I learned how to write grants, and in one year helped to raise $55,000, nearly half of Reading Connections' operating expenses at the time.

But most importantly, I learned about the courage it took for adults who had lived with the secret handicap of illiteracy to seek help, the commitment it took for them to improve their skills when they were already stretched between work and family, and the joy of accomplishment when they began to reach their goals—learning how to manage their own bank accounts, to fill out job paperwork, to read stories to their children. Really, the kinds of things most of us do every day without thinking about it.

When the students were honored at our annual awards dinner, which was held in the spring toward the end of my VISTA year, I can't tell you how proud I was of them and of myself for just knowing them. Their stories had galvanized a part of our community, and 10 years later, Reading Connections continues to serve hundreds of students every year. In the end, I learned that what I loved best about reading—the story—is the most important thing to all of us. ★

VISTA Poster

the Bright Side of a Wheelchair

*By Gordon Richins—AmeriCorps*VISTA, 1994-1996, Logan, Utah*

My life changed completely on August 9, 1987. That day, after 15 years of dairy farming, I was loading bales of hay onto a truck. A bale fell from the top of the haystack and struck me on the head, which severed my spinal cord between the fourth and fifth cervical vertebrae in my neck. I was paralyzed from the neck down.

After two weeks in intensive care and six months in a rehabilitation unit, I returned home on January 10, 1988, with very little arm movement and no hand movement. Life would never be the same for my wife, Faustine, my son, Dustin, and me. We were scared to death about how to deal with my physical disability and unemployment.

I soon realized I must carve out a new life for myself and my young family. Being home from the hospital and enjoying the company and assistance of my community helped change my attitude toward the future. My friends and neighbors provided us with help and financial support, which I soon realized I could never repay. I promised to do anything I could to help give back to my community in any way.

I no longer had the physical ability to do farm labor on my in-laws' dairy farm. But I was given the opportunity to attend college at Utah State University, which is not too far from my home in Preston, Idaho, by the Idaho Vocational Rehabilitation program. The program provided me with the financial assistance to earn a degree and pursue employment that I would be able to do. It took four and a half years to graduate, an accomplishment I'm very proud of.

After graduating from Utah State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Agricultural Business, I interviewed with several companies but didn't receive an offer. A friend encouraged me to check into a position as an Outreach Specialist with OPTIONS for Independence, northern Utah's Center for Independent Living. I got an interview, was offered the position and realized that my life would change again, this time in a very positive manner.

I served two years as an Outreach Specialist and AmeriCorps*VISTA member. During that time I became passionate about advocating for people with disabilities, realizing there were many disability issues that had direct influence on the quality of life of people

with disabilities. I soon realized I had joined an organization that generated a very positive outlook on life with a disability instead of the negative outlook of "you can't do this or you won't be able to do that."

Under Helen Roth's direction, my two years with OPTIONS for Independence was very busy and productive. It was a time of personal growth as my outlook on life changed dramatically. People with disabilities deal with quality-of-life issues that the rest of America takes for granted. I attended many community activities, trainings, and statewide systems change projects that allowed me to address those issues directly. I also joined three national groups that advocate for individuals with disabilities, allowing me to better represent Utah and my friends and family. My involvement resulted in community improvements, including accessibility to transportation and housing.

One of my projects was an information booklet that provided community contact information for individuals with a disability. It answered the many questions I had when I left the hospital. The booklet was shared throughout northern Utah and mailed out to consumers statewide as requested. Another was the development of a community advocacy group to address community issues, such as those addressed in the Americans with Disabilities Act. The group, Concerned Citizens with Disabilities Coalition, is still active today, 10 years after its development.

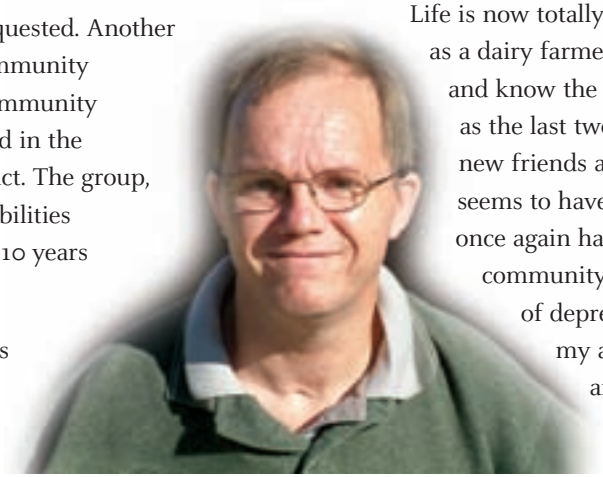
I also graduated from Partners in Policy Making, a statewide advocacy program designed to develop community advocates willing to engage in community systems change that enhance the quality of life for people with disabilities. Being a driving force in this community enhancement is very gratifying.

Life is good again.

I have very fond memories of people I met, places I went and the community changes I was part of during my VISTA position. Giving back to my community gave me a new sense of worth after becoming an individual with a serious physical disability, quadriplegia.

As I neared the end of my two years, I realized I had changed as a person, I could see my community changing, and I felt good about myself and my involvement in the process. As I worked on a resume to pursue future employment, my Bachelor of Science degree now had a lot of experience to go with it. I had also gained a level of confidence I had never had before. I knew I could go to work somewhere, make a difference, and pay my own bills. I even paid off my student loans with the AmeriCorps Education Award and was able to utilize the remainder of my tuition dollars for additional college courses.

Life is now totally different than my 15 years as a dairy farmer. I look at life differently and know the future will be just as positive as the last two years have been. My new friends are always positive and this seems to have rubbed off on me. I am once again happy; I'm repaying my community and do not have the level of depression I experienced after my accident. I'm too busy to sit around and feel sorry for myself. Life is good again. ★



Gordon Richins, today

Testimony to a Legacy of Service

VISTA Poster

*By John D. Ossowski—AmeriCorps*VISTA, 1997-1998, Utica, N.Y.*

The year I spent as an AmeriCorps*VISTA was one of the most definitive moments of my life. At the time I was accepted for service, I faced the prospect of graduating from college with little to no direction for the future.

My family disagreed with my willingness to take a year off from college and put my graduation on hold, but I was convinced it was the right thing to do. Looking back, I can honestly say the decision to commit to service was my first real act of independence. And it was absolutely the right thing to do.

From August 1997 to August 1998, I worked with the Young Scholars Liberty Partnerships Program at Utica College in Utica, N.Y. The Young Scholars partnerships program is a collaborative project between Utica College and the Utica City School District, whose goal is to meet the challenge of motivating teenage students to stay in school, earn a New York State Regents Diploma, and pursue post-secondary education. At Utica College, I served the program as a tutor. AmeriCorps*VISTA stationed me at a high school site full time to expand program services for a diverse population of urban youth.

The challenge during my year of service was establishing a strong community-service and service-learning component for Young Scholars students. Throughout the school year, I worked with another AmeriCorps*VISTA to coordinate various community service projects for Young Scholars students. We discovered that involving students in their community gave them a sense of pride in it. This sense of pride spilled over into students' school communities and was reflected in their approach to schoolwork.

Make a Difference Day in 1997 was one of several memorable projects. Many of our students lived in Cornhill, an economically depressed neighborhood. Participating in the Cornhill Cleanup Project, sponsored by the Cornhill Coalition of Block Associations, gave students the chance to do something to help their own community. Despite the rain and cold, students worked with other community members to clean up trash on the streets. It also gave them a firsthand look at the problem of litter and the opportunity to take ownership over the place they called home.

Their service focused on something different during a project at Adrean Terrace, a municipal housing project. Joining with AmeriCorps*VISTAs and AmeriCorps members from other areas, students collected discarded books from the Utica Public Library to create a small library at the housing project. By bringing books into

their neighborhood, making written material more accessible to their neighbors, students encouraged literacy. Again, as with the neighborhood clean-up project, students had the opportunity to improve their immediate community.

As a long-term project, we helped organize a soda can tab drive. Taking our cue from an article in a service organization's magazine, we challenged students to see how many tabs they could collect for recycling to benefit the Shriners Children's Hospitals. This project focused on "kids helping kids." At the end of the year, we turned the project into a miniature math lesson to calculate the number of tabs collected. Rather than take on the cumbersome task of counting the mountain of can tabs, we designed a solution involving volume. Students needed to determine the approximate number of can tabs that would fit into a cubic inch. They then needed to calculate the volume of the receptacle holding the tabs (in terms of cubic inches). This number was multiplied by the number of can tabs per cubic inch and it was found that students had amassed more than 88,000 can tabs in one year's time.

... involving students in their community gave them a sense of pride in it.

John Ossowski, today

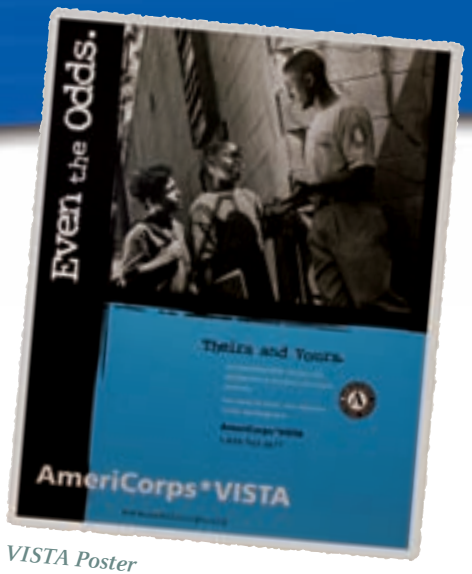
Since the implementation of the program's community service component through AmeriCorps*VISTA, Young Scholars students have collectively logged thousands of service hours investing in their communities. Students in junior high are now required to complete 15 hours of community service a year, with those at the high school level expected to finish 30 hours. In addition, the tradition of doing community service in our students' neighborhoods has been expanded. For example, several times a year, Young Scholars students volunteer at a local nursing home, assisting with special events as wait staff for residents and their families.

Recently, students painted a mural in a playground frequented by Young Scholars students and their families. Students designed the mural themselves, and it was approved by the local Youth Bureau. Young Scholars students, with the help of staff, transferred their design to a blank wall and painted their inspirational message in vibrant colors.

My year of service passed quickly and seems to have evaporated into the past—it's still hard for me to believe it ended almost seven years ago. Several of the students I worked with have gone on to complete not only high school but college as well. As for me, the direction I was so longing for has come to me. My service with VISTA was a salient clue on my journey beyond college. Currently, I am serving the Young Scholars Liberty Partnerships Program as assistant director. Each day, I see reminders of the work I did with AmeriCorps*VISTA reflected in the work I do today. ★

2000-2005

Shaving My Head



VISTA Poster

*By Bill Arnold—AmeriCorps*VISTA, 2002-2003, Hermitage, Mo.*

Hermitage, Mo., a small, poor rural community, offered few job opportunities other than farming or the limited tourist trade. It's so off the beaten track that Wal-Mart is an hour away. Even though I had lived in the area for eight years, I was still an outsider and had a lot to learn.

I never thought literacy was a local issue because I considered myself well educated and illiteracy was not a problem for me. But when I started working with grown men who could not read a menu or young mothers who graduated from school but couldn't read to their babies, I knew differently. Compounding the problem was a local "change is bad" mindset and parents holding the attitude, "I don't read so why do my kids need to read?" The area was decaying. Many of the kids left Hermitage as soon as they graduated high school. Sooner or later, if no improvement was made, all that would be left in Hermitage would be the elderly and dead beats.

I began my VISTA experience at the Hickory County Library in 2002 where I had already been volunteering for about a year as a tutor and reader at story time. When I applied to join VISTA, little did I know I was about to embark on a life changing voyage! There were many challenges I had as family literacy program coordinator, and I took them on, one at a time.

Hermitage needed literacy programs. I believe that literacy is the most important factor in controlling one's life. So I established after school programs to get children and their parents involved with reading. These programs blossomed into many wonderful activities: storytellers, historic reenactments, puppet shows, and magicians came in conjunction with the programs at our schools.

To encourage literacy at an early age, we sponsored local versions of national literacy contests, like Reading Rainbow, and Letters about Literature. The first year there were 20 entries in the children's writing contest. The next year, there were more than 80. We organized pizza parties for the entrants and their families and gave prizes. The message was getting out there. Folks were getting involved!

Fundraising events became more and more successful. People donated books, which were given away at every opportunity at local fairs and festivals. Each year more than 300 books were given away to young readers. We

also registered people for library cards and promoted other library activities. Circulation improved at the library. Eventually, we even moved into a new library thanks in part to the increased awareness made possible through my VISTA efforts.

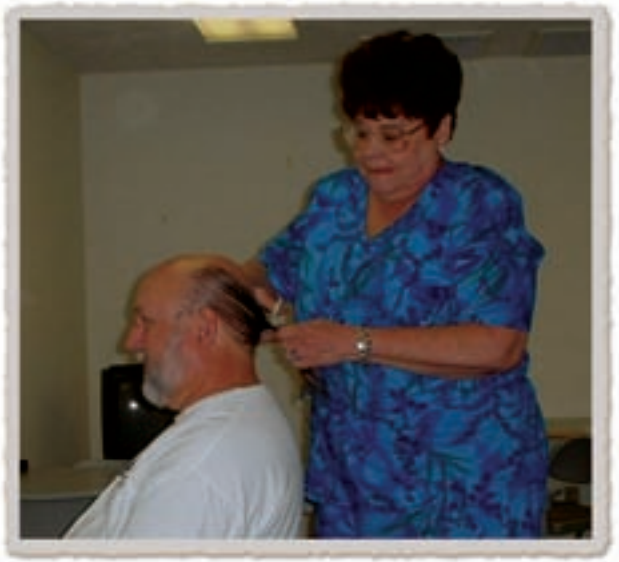
My VISTA service led me to increased involvement. Jumping in with both feet, I served on the board of the Hickory County Community Foundation, and the Polk County Community Connections. I also joined the board for our Head Start Policy Council. Through my involvement with the Missouri Humanities Council, a cultural organization that promotes community, citizenship, and lifelong learning, I organized a public forum for people to gain a better understanding of world current events. The forum was a highlight of my VISTA service. One of the speakers was originally from Iraq and a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the Southwest Missouri State University. He discussed the Iraqi culture and how the events of 9/11 had affected him. The event attracted 150 people, and I think they received a new view of a tense situation.

But my primary focus was literacy. I did anything necessary to encourage reading, everything from wearing a dress and wig for "Grandma's Story Time" to shaving my head as part of a reading challenge (If the local kids read 2,000 books during the summer I would shave my head). Not exactly what I had envisioned as a VISTA member, but it got the community involved.

I only wish I had known about the opportunity before I was 50 years old.

The Family Literacy Program at Hickory County Library has been very successful. Students who once had a hard time in school significantly improved their grades. One student even won a writing contest. We recruited and trained community volunteers to tutor and read to both children and adults. We worked with State Fair Community College in Sedalia, Mo., to bring a general equivalency diploma (GED) trainer to the library to train tutors for GED classes. We also accessed the training and support services of Literacy Investment for Tomorrow-Missouri, a not-for-profit corporation to improve literacy services throughout Missouri.

When my service with VISTA ended in August 2003, I was determined not to let the momentum die. The outcome is the Tri-County Literacy Council. Next we are



Bill Arnold, 2000s

embarking on a grant writing venture to fund technology centers in the area. We hope to continue to provide up-to-date literacy tutoring for adults, families, and those learning English as a second language.

Although my VISTA service is over, I keep involved with the literacy initiatives. I now work with Literacy Consultants of Missouri for training, and the Tri-County Literacy Council is in the process of becoming accredited through Pro-Literacy Worldwide. Overall, I believe my service through VISTA has made a huge impact on the community—not only in raising a few reading levels, but also in raising awareness about the importance of literacy.

At this moment we are working with a local bank to obtain office space for our programs. The Literacy Council also is in the forefront of forming a literacy coalition that will serve all of southwestern Missouri.

Perhaps the biggest event for me happened in June 2004. With the AmeriCorps Education Award I earned from VISTA, I obtained an associate degree in business administration through an online college. I graduated with honors, and I am now thinking seriously about going for my bachelor's degree.

My life has been greatly affected by my service to VISTA, and in turn, the community at large has been impacted by programs set into place. I see a bright future as we continue to strive for excellence in literacy in Hickory County. VISTA has truly been an experience. I only wish I had known about the opportunity before I was 50 years old. I strongly recommend VISTA service to people in the area who have no direction in their lives. Much like my military training, it has been life changing. And the changes continue! ★

Bill Arnold, today

Green Space at the Bend

VISTA Poster

*By Sonja A. Hervi—AmeriCorps*VISTA, 2002-2003, Salt Lake City, Utah*

In a world that sometimes seems chaotic, angry, and full of despair, Bend-in-the-River is a place that offers hope and peace.

Formerly a two-acre wasteland on the banks of Salt Lake City's Jordan River, Bend-in-the-River was transformed into an urban green space and environmental education area, thanks to the hard work and passion of hundreds of volunteers from the community, university, elementary school, and corporate groups. During the past six years, "the Bend" became a cornerstone for the ethnically and socioeconomically diverse community surrounding it. It's also become a positive symbol for a struggling community unfairly labeled "not quite good enough." Instead of giving up, many residents are fighting back, getting involved, making a difference, and chipping away at the walls of doubt, intolerance, and narrow-mindedness surrounding them. The Bend is a catalyst of this magical change.

Bend-in-the-River represents the truest sense of community partnership. Diverse partner agencies, including the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center at the University of Utah, Tree Utah, Utah Society for Environmental Education, Utah Federation for Youth, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and Salt Lake City Corporation, generously contribute. The project allows people in the surrounding neighborhoods to get involved and feel like they are making a genuine difference in their community. Although all age groups participate, it's the youth involvement that is most exciting. Parkview Elementary, the partner school for the project, and its students have been active since the project's inception. They helped survey the area when it was an overgrown, abandoned mess. And through the creative lens inherent to children, they saw past the weeds and garbage to envision a place they could call their own. Parkview students pulled weeds, planted trees, painted pictures, studied migratory birds, tested water quality, and wrote earth poetry. The Bend site now hosts hundreds of schoolchildren every year, and each fall, there is a new group of excited students who have heard about the Bend from an older sibling, neighbor, or cousin.

As the AmeriCorps*VISTA project coordinator, I got to work with these amazing kids each week. Although I usually taught the lesson, I ended up learning so much

from the students, like how to say "river" in Spanish or how to sneak up to a tree without scaring away the downy woodpecker. But the most important lesson I learned occurred during a Saturday service project.

A group of student leaders from the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center (my AmeriCorps*VISTA sponsor agency) and a group of teenagers from Odyssey House, a residential drug and alcohol treatment center in Salt Lake City, visited the Bend. It was a wonderful, warm fall day, and the kids from Odyssey House impressed me with their enthusiasm and hard work. After our service project, we held a reflection session in the Michael Foundation Urban Tree House, the Bend's outdoor classroom. I told the participants a little more about the history of the project and thanked them for their help. Then I asked for their thoughts. Based on my experience with teenagers, I wasn't expecting much response.

The Bend reaches kids, even if it's one at a time, and gives them an outlet to make a tangible change for the better ...

They surprised me as almost every one of them took a turn to thank or congratulate each other and speak about the importance of service. Our reflection period was ending when one quiet young man spoke up. He told us that he had grown up in the surrounding neighborhood, and he remembered when the Bend was unsafe for kids and families. He also confessed that he and his cousins had been responsible for some of the mischief. Everyone laughed, but then his tone turned more serious. He said that he couldn't wait to finish his term at Odyssey House so he could bring his cousins to Bend-in-the-River and show them the changes.

At that moment, I realized the incredible importance of Bend-in-the-River and other projects like it. The Bend reaches kids, even if it's one at a time, and gives them an outlet to make a tangible change for the better, both in their community and in themselves. It dawned on me that the Odyssey House kids working to remove invasive weeds at the Bend was remarkably similar to them working to remove negative elements from their own lives. Conversely, each time a new shrub or tree is planted at the site, it affords us an opportunity to worry about something other than the concerns of daily life and just focus on the simple act of planting a tree—the labor of digging a hole, the feeling of soil between our fingers, and the care and concern necessary to ensure the seedling will survive.

If the students who enjoy the Bend can learn to care for the land in this way, I have every hope that they can spread that knowledge. Not only just in taking care of the earth, but also in taking care of each other and their communities. Perhaps it's idealistic, but idealism brought me to national service with AmeriCorps*VISTA. And in difficult times like these, what else do we have besides the belief that each of us can make a difference?

I often think about the young man who joined the reflection conversation and told us about his history at Bend-in-the-River and his plans for the future. I hope he does come back to the Bend many times to see the changes he made on the site. And I hope it inspires him, as he did me.

My AmeriCorps*VISTA experience changed both my outlook on the world and plans for the future. During my two years working as a Bend-in-the-River VISTA volunteer, what I saw in each person that came to the site, whether for educational or service reasons, continually amazed me. I especially enjoyed working with the schoolchildren and ended up going back to school for my teaching certification and a graduate degree in Education. I now teach in a wonderful elementary school with demographics similar to the schools I visited for the Bend project: lower income, ethnically diverse, and largely transient. These demographics could be reasons for my students to give up and drop out. Instead, like at the Bend, they care about this school and the surrounding community. I see so much potential in each of them to make a positive difference in their community, and I am proud to be a part of the faculty that makes this school a safe place for them.

I am grateful for my VISTA experience and the ways it helped me grow, both personally and professionally. Most of all, I am grateful for the opportunity I had to spend two years at the Bend, in a community that I otherwise might not have explored. ★

Sonja Hervi, today

a Cry for Tomorrow's Child

*By Jatis J. Edmond—AmeriCorps*VISTA, 2004-2005, Charlotte, N.C.*

As a divorced parent working in the area of special education, my major focus always had been on helping children with handicaps and learning disabilities. I had also volunteered to help deprived children from the inner city. After retiring and moving to Charlotte, N.C., however, I felt a void in my life.

VISTA Poster

I yearned to continue living a "life with purpose" and to reach out to other children to share my love and support. This longing to do more for children led me to become an AmeriCorps*VISTA member with the Amachi program.

Almost a year and a half has passed since I started as an AmeriCorps*VISTA volunteer with the Amachi Program at Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Charlotte. Amachi is a unique program in which people of faith mentor children of promise. Amachi is a Nigerian Ibo word that means "who knows but what God has brought us through this child." The Amachi premise is that each child has the potential to become a productive person if given proper nurturing and opportunity. As an AmeriCorps*VISTA member, it is my job with Amachi to identify the children of incarcerated parents so that they may be matched with a mentor.

The Amachi staff at Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Charlotte has been working fervently to ensure that the children of incarcerated parents in Charlotte receive the kind of mentoring that will help them become productive members of society. According to statistics, an estimated 7.3 million children nationwide have one or both parents in prison. Without effective intervention, 70 percent of these children will likely follow their parents' path. Through Amachi, dedicated volunteers from the faith community are mentoring more than 200 children in Charlotte. It is through the mentoring that the cycle of incarceration might be broken.

Many of these children are being reared by grandparents or great-grandparents because, in many instances, both parents are incarcerated. Trying to put the caregivers at ease when explaining the Amachi Program takes enormous effort.

An inordinate amount of my time is spent responding to comments, questions, and suspicions, such as: Who are you? Where did you get my name? What makes you think my child needs help from anyone other than myself? and Why do you think you can do a better job

than I can? Many of the guardians are concerned about who will mentor their child and if the child will be safe.

On the other hand, there are those who are not interested at all and do not want to hear anything about the program and, furthermore, do not trust our intent. I have been told, "Don't call back again." Recruiting children for the program is very difficult when there are such suspicions and distrust about almost everyone. Nevertheless, I know that I can never loose faith if I want to ensure a successful program, so I don't give up. Instead, I call another family that might be interested.

Many people are genuinely concerned for children of incarcerated parents. The grandparents and great-grandparents seem to have the most interest, but they are usually so overwhelmed because, in many instances, they are taking care of two or more of their grandchildren and/or great-grandchildren.

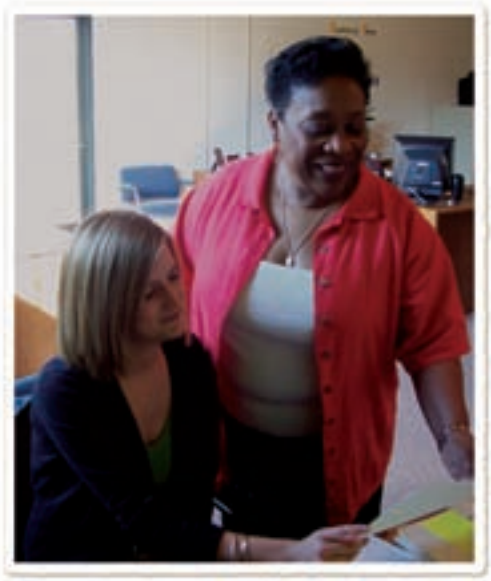
In some cases, both the parents and grandparents are incarcerated. I try to identify with the great-grandparents who are often afraid and have no idea how to relate to young children in their care. They limit the children's activities to attending school and church for fear that something may happen to them anywhere else. They often tell me, "The children are embarrassed because they think I am too old and they don't want anyone to know that they live with me." In spite of all their difficulties, grandparents and great-grandparents care for them to the best of their ability while the parents are away.

What a shock it was to learn that it is not unusual for a teenage father who is in prison to meet his incarcerated father for the first time, and neither the teenage father nor his father had knowledge that either existed before this first encounter. Often times there are three generations of incarcerated fathers in the same prison and usually none of the fathers will have had any contact with his children before they met in prison. Prison is where they form father and son relationships. On the other hand, women who are incarcerated tend to take an interest in their children and stay in contact with the person caring for them. The women also have a great deal of input in raising their children.

One of my greatest satisfactions since working with Amachi came when I informed my minister about Amachi and how he embraced the program. My church has become one of the Amachi churches that provide mentors. In addition to providing volunteers from the congregation, he also became a mentor.

Being the supportive grandmother that I am, I can empathize with the complete sacrifice that has to be made in caring for young children. With each generation comes new challenges, attitudes, and reshaped values. My personal philosophy about children is that if given love, support, and proper nurturing, they can accomplish anything in life, regardless of their beginnings.

Friends and family often comment on my motivation and commitment to these children, and I hope that from their observations they, too, will become interested in some aspect of AmeriCorps*VISTA. ★



Jatis J. Edmond, today

My Time to Give

VISTA Poster

*By Mehdi Sina—AmeriCorps*VISTA, 2004-2005, Long Beach, Calif.*

The year I was born was a turbulent time in Iran, my native country. A few months after my birth, the face of my country changed dramatically. The Shah was overthrown and the Islamic Republic of Iran was established.

A year later, Saddam Hussein launched an unprovoked war on Iran that lasted nearly a decade and cost more than a million lives. My family was fortunate enough to escape to a refugee camp in Sweden. We fled Iran with nothing, and without the help of others at the refugee camp, we would have been devastated. Living in a camp was not easy, but it was there that I learned what altruism and community are. The lessons I learned in Sweden never left me. I knew that one day I would be in a position to give back to a community in a way similar to how the camp gave to my family and me.

After three years in Sweden, we received permission to enter the United States. Despite some trying and tumultuous times abroad and in the United States, my family made it. My older brother has a master's in Business Administration, my twin brother is in law school, my younger sister is at a university, and I am pursuing a career in medicine. With a name like Mehdi Sina, pronounced identically as the Spanish word for medicine, it might have been predestined.

However, before I committed myself to the rigors of medical education, I wanted to make a lasting contribution to a community in need. I heard about AmeriCorps*VISTA from a premedical student and I searched the Internet site for volunteer opportunities. It did not take more than a few minutes for me to find the Children's Clinic. I immediately called the clinic and spoke to the program supervisor. After hearing about the work they intended on doing in Long Beach, Calif., I was excited to join the team. Today, I am in my sixth month of service, and I could not be any happier with my choice to join the AmeriCorps*VISTA team.

Joining AmeriCorps as an AmeriCorps*VISTA member has enabled me to fulfill the promise that I made years ago as a child in Sweden. Back then, it was my family that was in need of support and direction. Today, I help deliver information, support, and direction to thousands of highly underserved people in Long Beach and surrounding communities. The Health Education Department of the Children's Clinic also helps families complete applications for low cost health insurance, coordinates healthy living seminars with diet and

exercise advice, and connects the community to valuable city and state resources. My work includes training community leaders to help patients fill out health insurance applications, recruiting and training volunteers to coordinate the Reach Out and Read early literacy program, and educating families on the importance of diet and exercise. The results of our office's work are seen when patients come into the clinic with active insurance policies and their physical exams reveal them to be more fit.

As any AmeriCorps*VISTA will attest, there are many sacrifices one makes when joining AmeriCorps*VISTA. Money is tight and we are sometimes overworked, but the personal growth I have experienced and the gratitude and satisfaction I see in the faces of our patients make the sacrifices miniscule.

Another added benefit of becoming an AmeriCorps*VISTA volunteer has been the opportunity to learn. I mentioned that I have learned a lot about myself, but I have also learned a great deal about the day-to-day operation of a nonprofit clinic and of state sponsored health insurance plans. I have become active outside of work through community organizations determined to increase the resources that are allocated by the city and state to communities that are in desperate need of money. Also, thanks to my area supervisor, I had an opportunity to attend the Governors Conference on Women and Families. In addition to networking and disseminating information about AmeriCorps and VISTA, I met the First Lady of California, Maria Shriver.

Obviously, being an AmeriCorps* VISTA is not always fun and games. In addition to living at near poverty, there are many other challenges that one faces. Of these challenges, the most difficult and continuing one for me is the language barrier between the clients I intend to serve and myself. The clinic serves a predominantly Latino/Latina community and many of our patients speak no English. Although I studied Spanish in high school, I feel ill-prepared for long conversations with clients. As I practice speaking with patients and co-workers I have become more comfortable, but I have a long way to go before I will be totally comfortable speaking just Spanish. My temporary discomfort does not compare to the value of the conversations I have with patients, and that keeps me energized and motivated.

Mehdi Sina, 2000s

My service thus far has given me much more than it has taken away from me. I feel infinitely more connected to the community that I serve, and I will take with me what I have learned as an AmeriCorps*VISTA to my career as a physician.

Katrina's Legacy: A Family Affair

*By Gina Hanson—AmeriCorps*VISTA, currently serving in Springhill, La.*

If it weren't for my VISTA service, I wouldn't have had the experience I needed to help nearly 500 people as they fled the Gulf Coast region after Hurricane Katrina.

VISTA Poster

On August 28, 2005, I was working as a VISTA for the Webster Habitat for Humanity (HFH) in Springhill, Louisiana. I helped with fundraising and coordinated the Collegiate Challenge, a program that brought in college students to build houses during their spring break. My responsibilities required me to find places for the college students to stay, find groups that would feed them one or two meals a day, and generate funding from various organizations.

Everything changed August 29.

Springhill is a rural community as far north in Louisiana as you can get without tripping over the Arkansas border. While we were spared the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, we were not spared her aftermath. Like everyone else in the country, we watched it unfold on television. Unlike many, we were close enough to take in evacuees who had been displaced by the storm.

I saw these people and my heart went out to them. Just about everyone has seen the images, but it doesn't compare to standing face to face with them. They were tired, hungry, haggard, and scared. They had lost everything. They had only what they could carry and that wasn't much.

The days following the storm were a whirlwind. All I recall is doing what needed to be done. We set up temporary shelters, got these folks fed, and coordinated distribution of food and clothing donations, which, thankfully, were plentiful. Eventually we had to create a permanent solution. My friends, John Downs and Tommy Brown, both members of the Ministerial Alliance, opened the Trinity Worship Center gymnasium to the evacuees.

As soon as Trinity's gym opened, Springhill needed someone to manage it. When the town leaders called a meeting at the Civic Center, I wasn't even going to go. I had responsibilities to my family and to Webster Habitat for Humanity. I thought, "I'm only one person. What can I do?" But a friend convinced me to go and what I saw was an opportunity to serve my community and use the skills that Habitat for Humanity and VISTA had helped me develop. Someone had to manage the shelter and make sure everyone got what

Gina Hanson, today

they needed to survive. Someone had to step up and assume responsibility for the evacuees. I felt a nudge and I took the step. That nudge, I'm convinced now, was God urging me to help these people.

My VISTA experience kicked in right then and there. Webster HFH released me from my commitment so I could assume the duties of running the shelter. The way I saw it, these people needed shelter, food, and basic facilities first. They got that at the shelter. Next they needed to get in touch with FEMA so they could register for whatever assistance they could get. We set that up at the local Habitat affiliate.

> I saw these people and my heart went out to them.

But these people needed to move beyond basics. Because of my work with VISTA, I had the connections around the community to set things in motion. Tommy Brown and I went to the Chamber of Commerce and addressed its members. We asked them for whatever assistance they could provide—but not money. We asked them to help us locate vacant houses and apartments. We asked landlords to waive first month's rent to help people who wanted to settle here once they got funding from the government. One woman donated a house; another furnished it. Others opened vacant homes and apartments.

I also pursued local employers for the evacuees. A local restaurant needed a waitress, so I recommended one of the girls we were sheltering. My husband, Timmy, owns a landscaping company and hired a couple of the older boys to help on a couple jobs. I arranged for others to join cleaning crews to clean offices after hours.

A group of more than 20 Vietnamese evacuees posed a particular challenge because they spoke little English. The only other person around who spoke Vietnamese was Tam, an orphan from Vietnam who was raised here and now owns a nail salon in Springhill. He volunteered his time to help communicate between us, FEMA, and the Vietnamese evacuees. He even hired one of the Vietnamese girls to learn how to do nails in his shop.

I did my part to help the evacuees, but so did my husband. Not only did he continue his regular job, but he was also at the shelter when I needed someone to take out the trash or help the evacuees move into homes. My daughters got involved, too, by befriending or looking after some of the younger girls at the shelter.

By rough count, 500 evacuees came through Springhill looking for assistance. Some stayed, some moved on. Regardless, our work at the shelter was like witnessing a thousand wonders. I look back at it and think there is no way things should have worked. Things came together that never should have and everything that had to happen, happened.

Katrina's legacy, like Pearl Harbor and 9/11 before it, will be one of horrors, despair, and destruction. These events earned those legacies. But our work, here in Springhill and that of volunteers all over the region, deserves its own legacy, a legacy of perseverance, a legacy of sheltering those who have nowhere else to go, a legacy of reaching out, a legacy of service. ★

Become an AmeriCorps*VISTA Member

AmeriCorps*VISTA members choose from projects throughout the country based on their skills and interests, and serve full time for one year with community-based organizations (faith-based and secular). Assignments may involve starting new programs; recruiting and training volunteers; writing grant proposals; seeking out sponsorships; establishing partnerships with local businesses, organizations, churches, and schools; planning community meetings; or handling public relations. Whatever the task or challenge, AmeriCorps*VISTA members make a lasting difference for low-income communities in need.

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