

Presidents' Summit for America's Future

Reflections of a Delegate to the Presidents' Summit for America's Future

Trudy Seita

The Presidents' Summit for America's Future was a three-day meeting in Philadelphia with lots of speeches, entertainment, and photo opportunities for a well-planned media blitz. It was an historic event. As a delegate, I would not have wanted to be anywhere else on this planet of ours during those three historic days in April 1997. I enjoyed the rousing, energetic speeches. I enjoyed the stirring music. I got goose bumps during the powerful prayer in unison led by the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the charge given by the Rev. Buster Soaries from Somerset, New Jersey, delivered in Martin Luther King speaking-style cadences. But, most importantly, I enjoyed seeing the leaders of our country, the major power-brokers, the entertainment industry personalities, and the media moguls coming together in agreement and genuine comradery with grass-roots volunteers. Everyone agreed we must act now if we are going to save our children and, ultimately, save our country.

The summit was much more than speeches, entertainment, and fireworks. It was about work and how we, the American people, can accomplish the goal of reaching 2 million additional at-risk children by the end of the year 2000 by providing five basic resources for success. If you haven't memorized these resources by now, you should. They are:

- A caring responsible adult as a teacher, coach or mentor;
- Safe places to learn and grow after school;
- A healthy start through immunizations, health exams, eye exams, hearing exams;
- Marketable skills through education; and
- An opportunity for youth to give back through community service.

The dream was, and the goals are, to *mentor, protect, nurture, teach, and serve*. As Walt Disney said, "If we can dream it, we can do it."

The conference included structured strategic planning for program development and implementation for delegates to use when they returned to their home states and local communities. As a member of a delegation I spent those hours in intense discussion, brainstorming ideas on how best to meet the goals of "2 million by 2000." The conference organizers provided a structure for these discussions that helped delegates remain focused throughout the eight-hour process. Volunteer support staff with laptop computers captured our discussions, providing a written draft document of our plan of action to take home. All delegations established specific measurable goals and most were planning local community and

Trudy Seita is a nationally-known trainer, author, and consultant in volunteer program leadership and organizational change. She was selected as a member of the Charleston, West Virginia, delegation to the Presidents' Summit for America's Future for her work as chair of the West Virginia Commission for National and Community Service and as founder and board president of the Volunteer Action Center in Parkersburg, West Virginia. She is author of *Communications: A Positive Message From You* and *Leadership Skills for the New Age of Nonprofits* and, with co-author Sue Waechter, of *Change: Meet It and Greet It*, all published by Heritage Arts Publishing.

state summits to gain additional commitments to the goals of the Philadelphia Summit and to get the work done.

Critics of the summit focused on the negatives: too much hoopla, technical glitches of teleprompters and sound systems, a shuttle bus system that didn't always arrive or depart on time. As a delegate, the summit I experienced was exactly what Colin Powell, summit chair, said it would be in a pre-summit video teleconference. He said, "The summit will be like coming together on a mountain top where we can share information and ideas and get a broad view of the countryside below. It will be a place where we can gain inspiration. Then we will come down from our mountain top prepared and energized and ready to do the work in the valleys where we live."

When the summit was over I asked several delegates from different communities for their reactions and was overwhelmingly met with the same response. "We're excited about the possibilities." "I can't wait to get home and get to work." "We have our plan and we begin on Monday." A delegate from Fort Wayne, Indiana, said she came to Philadelphia with a sense of hope and anticipation, but with reservations and—she was now sorry to admit—even a bit of cynicism. But she was going home energized and ready to work to fulfill the promise for America's youth in her community.

However, the critics are right. The summit won't be the cure-all for America's problems. We still need jobs and health care—lots of things. But the summit is a beginning, a reawakening of our country, a call to action. If this great country of ours is to survive into the 21st century, then it is the responsibility of every man, woman, and child—all citizens—to be responsible, get involved and make the summit's five goals a reality. We already are doing a lot of good work in our communities, but we must do more or, perhaps, do it differently. And professionals in the field of volunteer administration should be providing the leadership for

this movement.

We must use the summit to create new dreams in every state and local community. We must help the children of our country and engage their parents and grandparents as well. We must forge new partnerships and build new collaborations. If we don't see it as our responsibility to begin this work, to set bold, audacious goals, to rekindle the spirit of volunteerism and neighbor-helping-neighbor that this country was founded upon, then who will? And, if we don't begin our work we will lose another generation of young people and be threatened with losing the entire foundation of our democracy.

The summit poses possibilities and problems for those working "in the valleys": How can we measure the outcomes of programs that may be developed? How can we, who are professionals in the field of volunteerism and social service delivery, be assured that quality programs are being offered? How can we do more when we already are stretched to the limit of our resources and energies? How can we be assured that someone with the wrong motivations will not harm the child s/he is meant to mentor and protect? And where will necessary additional leadership and financial support come from? These are valid questions and concerns. But rather than being cynical, let us simply be aware of these dangers, break down the barriers, and begin our work toward solutions.

The summit was an opportunity to catch the attention of Americans. People have said to me, "I saw that conference on TV. What can I do?" These comments were not from those already giving lots of time and dollars to help others. The media blitz was a wake-up call to our citizens and they are responding. As professionals let's get busy and find ways for them to serve in our communities in an effective way.

I am convinced the summit can and will make a difference in this country. But we must act fast to piggy-back on the momentum it has created and take advan-

tage of the commitments that have been made by corporations, organizations, and individuals. We must pledge a personal commitment to make resources available to the children in our communities, to their parents, and for all citizens. We must jump on the summit bandwagon, strengthen good programs already established, enhance services now offered, create new projects that will fill the gaps. We can accomplish the summit's goals. We can do it! And if we do, we save our chil-

dren, we give families hope, and we rekindle the spirit of America.

As she hid from the enemy in an attic during World War II, Anne Frank wrote in her diary, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." As professionals in the field we probably know our communities best and know where improvements are needed. Let us be proactive and lead the way. We have important work to do. Let us begin!