

Program Profiles

Service with a Corps Concept

City Year, Delta Service Corps and Volunteer Maryland!

By Andrew Carroll

Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, often remarks that service to others is "the rent we pay for living." For Stephen Spaloss, service, quite frankly, was a living that helped pay the rent. "I had gotten myself into quite a bit of trouble, and my dad said he wouldn't bail me out. He had gotten me out of trouble every time before, but now he said I had to support myself. That's when I joined City Year."

City Year

City Year is a Boston-based service corps program that enlists young people to perform community service every weekday from September through June. Participants, ages 17 to 23, are involved in everything from cleaning up playgrounds to serving as teachers' aides in public schools. Founded in 1988, City Year was the first youth service corps to be created and supported entirely by the private sector. It now receives additional funding from the federal government as a "model program" and is expanding its efforts nationwide. Along with the Boston corps, there are now full-year programs in Columbia, South Carolina, and Providence, Rhode Island.

For this year's 300 City Year participants and 40-

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City Year participants Alan Khazei, left, and Michael Brown.

person field staff, each morning begins with intensive group calisthenics. The jumping jacks and pep talks not only bring some blood to the cheeks, they work to encourage a sense of unity and cohesiveness. This is no small task in a group that is 35% black, 45% white, 11% Latino, 8% Asian, and 1% Native American, as well as a healthy mix of school drop-outs and college graduates. City Year not only stresses acting like a team, but looking like a team. All participants wear matching City Year gear, including khaki pants and a red jacket emblazoned with the City Year logo. After their morning workout, the teams of 10 to 12 members go to sites in the Boston area for eight hours a day, every weekday. There are also leadership training, team-building, and educational sessions and activities on Fridays.

In return for their efforts, each participant receives a weekly \$100 stipend, as well as G.E.D. and basic education classes if needed. Corps members also receive college and career advising and workshops in such areas as budgeting and life-skills planning. Participants are encouraged to serve on committees which govern the corps and to develop special projects such as creating internship programs with organizations they'd like to help. Gary Orren, City Year's director of national policy, stresses the

importance of the participants' involvement in planning and governance: "Basically, it's crucial that we seize every opportunity to empower these young people so that they can have a real say in structuring their lives. We've found that they always rise to the occasion and perform beyond many people's expectations. Not to mention their own."

Upon successfully completing the City Year program, each participant receives a post-service bonus—either \$4,725 for higher education or job training, \$2,000 in cash, or \$4,000 in US Savings Bonds. As with other corps, bonuses serve as incentives for participants to finish their year. Many do not. The reasons are as diverse as the participants: some cannot withstand the rigor of rising early; others cannot survive on the modest stipend; a few are called away because of pressing family matters; and more than one has repeatedly broken the rules clearly defined in five pages of no-no's. Still, City Year's graduation rates have been impressive: In 1993, 85% of the participants were graduated on time. Not bad, especially considering that M.I.T., in neighboring Cambridge, had a graduation rate of about 87%.

Delta Service Corps

Programs like City Year are clearly having a positive impact on young people and, not surprisingly, phrases like "youth empowerment," "a new generation of activists," and "an investment in our future" pop up repeatedly in brochures, mission statements, and annual reports. Other service programs, however, are seeing an impact on another generation: older Americans. Delta Service Corps, for example, is very similar to City Year in structure and goals. It, too, includes many young adults (starting at age 17), but there is no upper age limit. In fact,

some of DSC's participants are in their eighties. Delta Service Corps got off the ground in the fall of 1992, and now has over 400 full-time, part-time, and Senior Corps members assisting more than 219 sites in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. By the year 1995, DSC will have over 1,000 participants.

Twenty-five percent of the DSC's members are 60 years or older, and the Senior Corps members work alongside their younger counterparts and participate in all of the same activities. No matter how grueling. "Especially in the team projects," remarks Trudy Bell, director of the Louisiana division of the Delta Service Corps, "the seniors are right there with the younger corps members helping in all the same ways — renovating homes, cleaning parks, and just doing what needs to be done." J.R. Doyle, who started as a Senior Corps member and is now head of the whole Arkansas DSC division, strongly believes that "retirees don't want to sit around twiddling their thumbs all day. People really want to get involved, we just have to ask 'em.'"

DSC places its participants individually at their service sites, which includes nonprofit and government agencies sprinkled evenly throughout the three states. But corps members are encouraged to work in groups of ten about once a week. Collectively, they tackle larger problems, like recruiting donors for a blood drive or organizing a massive park clean-up in a high crime area. The teams also spend their time together reflecting on service and the importance of leadership (and followership).

Full-time DSC members work 40 hours a week and receive \$4.50 an hour. Members who successfully complete the nine and one-half month program get \$4,750 to be used either for higher education, student loans or apprenticeship programs. The part-time members will work nine hours a week at \$4.50 an hour starting fall of 1994; they are now eligible for a post-service benefit of \$2,000. Cynthia Carter, a member of the Arkansas Delta Service Corps, is quick to emphasize that money is not the motivation for being involved. "There is no monetary value," she explains, "to equal the rewards or the memories that have come with serving my community." Les Brunson, director of Delta Service Corps, also stresses that the service program is considerably more than a job. "It's not just about paying people to do community service. It's about inspiring them—inspiring their communities—to make a difference. I think this is the true spirit of any service corps."



Intergenerational members of Delta Service Corps work together to restore a minority church burned by three white teenage arsonists.

Volunteer Maryland!

This spirit is at the heart of Volunteer Maryland! as well. But unlike City Year and Delta Service Corps, VM! was specifically created to encourage the general public to volunteer. Before initiating VM!, Governor William Schaefer's Advisory Board on Service and Citizenship discovered two major obstacles preventing Maryland's citizens from volunteering. The first, quite simply, was that they weren't being asked. Second, many of the organizations in need of volunteers didn't have the time or resources to organize and manage a strong and dependable volunteer force. For Eleanor Young, VM!'s executive director, the latter was especially critical. "People often think there's a closet full of frozen volunteers you can just de-thaw and



The 1994 Volunteer Maryland! service class.

put to work," she said. "This is not the case. Volunteers have to be recruited, screened, placed, trained, and supported all the way. And if so, they'll perform brilliantly."

Learning while Serving

In 1910, the American philosopher William James promoted a version of national service that would teach young people the joys of "dish-washing, clothes-washing, and window-washing." The idea, James explained, was to have "the childishness knocked out of them [so they would] come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas."

Whether intended or not, City Year is having a similar effect on many participants. Stephen Spaloss, who was 21 when his father told him it was City Year or city jail, was transformed by the program. "City Year was the greatest experience of my life, especially considering where I was at," said Spaloss. "I had no self-esteem, and I thought I was just one style of person—a drug dealer, a street person and that's it. City Year gave me my family back, it gave me my whole life back." Spaloss not only completed his year successfully, he is now, at age 25, director of field operations at the new site in Providence. Another point of view is included in Susan Goldsmith's 1993 book, *A City Year*. The author interviewed a 25-year-old alumnus from a very wealthy background who said, "People have the idea that young people doing service will be very good for the ex-gang member, but it's equally important and good for society to get somebody like myself turned around through it.... At Skidmore I never volunteered for a thing. And that's totally unacceptable to me now. I learned that through service."

According to Kathleen Selz, executive director of

the National Association of Service & Conservation Corps, there are more than 100 established service corps in the United States, engaging more than 26,000 people in full-time or summer service. Wrapped up in these simple statistics are the glories of lives transformed and the everyday disasters that are part of any large-scale endeavor. As these numbers grow, the successes are likely to be more visible and the challenges certainly more complex.

For individuals like Alan Khazei, co-founder and co-director of City Year, the growth and importance of these programs is not just about the small, daily battles each corps member and coordinator must face; Khazei (pronounced Kay-zee) spies a greater war in our society, a quite ferocious one in fact between cynicism and idealism. "Cynicism," he said in a powerful 1991 speech, "is the most dangerous force in our society. It is marked by an often ill-natured inclination to stress faults and raise objections." He goes on, however, to argue that idealism is ultimately stronger. "It is the force that says—sometimes simply, sometimes inspiring, sometimes movingly, often quietly—that things are not what they should or could be, that we can do better and we must try."

Listening to the individual voices of service corps participants around this country—some showing signs of old age, others still holding traces of adolescence—one can hear unknowing echoes of Khazei's words. And the pitch is rising. ■

—Andrew Carroll

VM!'s 28 Volunteer Coordinators, ranging in ages from 20 to 26, visit 28 nonprofit organizations and government agencies throughout the state to help them recruit, train and maintain volunteers. The recruitment process includes everything from putting advertisements in community newspapers to making presentations at churches, synagogues and colleges.

Peggy Napoli, a 24-year-old regional coordinator for VM!, discovered that people were extremely open to volunteering. "It helped that I was encouraging people to work with kids, but even with the other coordinators, we found that if we could just match people's individual skills with the organizations' needs, they'd be all for it."

Young notes, with a hint of pride, that the volunteers VM! recruited are as diverse as the volunteer coordinators who inspired them to sign up; "We have everybody from military personnel to professionals to students to mothers on public assistance now volunteering."

Coordinators are given extensive training before hitting the streets to find potential volunteers. Before they even set foot on a service site, coordinators spend 21 days, nine to five, learning the nuts and bolts of leadership development, team building, conflict resolution, and the essentials of volunteer management. After the three-week course the coordinators, working hands-on at their service sites, are given refresher courses once a month. They also come together at a mid-year retreat to discuss common challenges and triumphs.

For their one-year commitment, VM! Coordinators receive an \$11,000 living stipend, as well as a \$5,000 post-service educational benefit. Of the 28 coordinators from 1993, 20 are now either working full-time with the nonprofits or government agencies where VM! had assigned them, serving as coordinators again or volunteering regularly at their former sites. The remaining coordinators are pursuing higher education or job hunting, and mostly in the public sector.

Although there are no concrete statistics on how many of the volunteers VM! recruited are still involved, the number of volunteers who signed up, not to mention their overall contribution, is dramatic. In 1993, VM!'s first year, the Volunteer Coordinators recruited and engaged more than 4,057 new volunteers who gave 220,445 hours of their time. These volunteers assisted people with Alzheimer's, taught English to immigrants, protected habitat at wildlife sanctuaries, worked in prisons, mentored at-risk youth and staffed Head Start centers.

Listening to Jeremy White, 20, who volunteers with the Crossway family support program, it is clear why Volunteer Maryland! has been so successful: "Anne Wilkinson, the coordinator who got me involved with Crossway, really went out of her way to make the experience personalized and rewarding for me. The whole program has definitely made me want to keep volunteering, no matter where I am." ■

Conflict Resolution

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volunteers who do work on behalf of those agencies.

The Bloomington (Indiana) Volunteer Network trains nonprofit agency board members and others in conflict management. Part of the training involves encouraging board members to acknowledge that conflicts even exist; often, members are aware of differences but don't want to discuss them, fearing drawn-out debates.

Many time-squeezed volunteer board members are simply too pressed to explore difficult issues, said Beth Neu, director of the city-funded network. Members are also hesitant to discuss conflicts because acknowledging disagreements contrasts with the "nice" image many volunteers have of each other.

"Many people refuse to engage in conflicts because they think assertive behavior is being aggressive, which is something they want to avoid," Neu said. "We try to get people to understand that being assertive isn't bad."

And neither, Neu says, are conflicts bad. For one thing, addressing disputes keeps boards fresh and dynamic, she said. Encouraging rather than suppressing conflicts also helps boards prioritize issues and move forward. Neu explained that conflict management training helps members understand differences between beliefs, values and facts. Attached to beliefs and values are often emotions that interfere with constructive debate. Once everybody agrees on what the facts are, they can then debate how those facts square with the board's mission statement and future plans.

Neu also teaches conflict management skills to nonboard members of a nonprofit agency. For instance, she has taught such skills to staffers with an organization's division. "It's important to have everybody within that division be involved in a [training] session so they all have access to and can benefit from the same set of skills," Neu said. She also instructs individual volunteers how to handle conflicts. For instance, in offering instruction to guardians ad litem (volunteers who advocate on behalf of children suspected of being abused), Neu always advises remaining focused on issues and never making accusatory "you" statements to caseworkers or parents.

"Instead, I would say, 'I think this should be done,' or, 'This is how I feel.' It helps prevent attacks on personalities," she said.

Sometimes, despite all best efforts, conflicts simply can't be resolved. But that doesn't mean engaging in conflict management training is wasted. Part of the training involves actively listening and being open and nonjudgemental. Even if problems can't be resolved, disputing parties get their feelings validated; thus healing often occurs. And when that takes place, volunteers know they've contributed to the betterment of society.