



Community Knowledge Key to Success:
Leading VISTAs in Alaska



"The Future is Now": A Year in
D.C.'s Mt. Pleasant Neighborhood

VISTA Viewfinder
Issue 12:
September 30, 2008

VISTA: Volunteers In Service To America
Since 1964, 175,000 Strong



VISTA
viewfinder



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From Eyebrows to Timelines: Adjusting to Culture in Rural Alaska

VISTA Leader AJ Salkoski expected some challenges when he transitioned from his first year of VISTA in Indianapolis to serving his second in Alaska. He was surprised by how small the 49th state's largest city, Anchorage, is compared to Indianapolis. Despite doing some research with the help of his sponsor organization, RurAL CAP (Rural Alaska Community Action Program), he still confronts cultural differences when traveling throughout the state.

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On top of the world: VISTA Leader AJ Salkoski on Flat Top Mountain during a Solstice hike.

“RurAL CAP has a good reputation out in the villages, so I have noticed that I’m more welcomed after people find out that I’m a worker within RurAL CAP, as opposed to someone who just landed there,” said AJ. “Most of the people speak English pretty well, but there was one cultural thing that threw me for a loop at first. When someone flips their eyebrows up, it means that they’re in agreement or a general yes. They’re eyebrows would go up, but I didn’t understand what they meant. I got a lot of blank stares, and it was an awkward silence.”

As a VISTA Leader, AJ supports the work of 10 VISTAs who serve in RurAL CAP projects across the state, most of them in remote villages that are only accessible via bush plane. RurAL CAP VISTAs work on a variety of community-based projects including organizing events as fundraisers to benefit large-scale projects in Selawik (which is North of the Arctic Circle), working on weatherization to make homes more energy efficient to lower heating bills during harsh winters and establishing a center for youth.

“The VISTAs are more diverse here than in Indiana from a background standpoint and a skills standpoint,” he said. “Not all VISTAs here are as classroom educated (many are, but not all) and have not been exposed to traditional forms of learning past the high school level. Those VISTAs tend to bring a better knowledge of their community or a strong cultural knowledge.”

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FAQ

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A snow day: AJ braves the winter weather in Seward, Alaska.

Besides adjusting to the cold weather and extensive traveling (he spent 18 hours in planes and airports without weather delays in three days), his biggest challenge in entering rural villages was a cultural understanding of time.

“The hardest part was learning how people live in the village and how to incorporate that into how I work,” he said. “I like to get things done as quickly as possible, and a lot of times it’s not that easy in the communities we work in. People are out hunting, fishing and berry picking or they want a community vote.”

Overall, AJ enjoys his service and advises his fellow VISTAs not limit themselves geographically, that their hometown will be there when they’re finished. It’s advice that he took to heart after moving 3,500 miles from home.

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The VISTA Experience Circa 1971-1972

By Paul Schrader
CNCS Area Manager
Columbus, OH

It was a typical hot, sultry day in August of 1971 when I arrived in Washington, D.C.’s Mt. Pleasant Neighborhood to begin a year of VISTA service—after surviving PSO at the University of Pennsylvania with a trainer about the size of a Penn State linebacker, who whacked us with a whiffle bat behind the knees to toughen us for life as a VISTA.



Paul Schrader, North Central Area Manager and VISTA alum, during a recent visit to VISTA headquarters.

Similar to today's PSO, we were told leaving something behind in the community was paramount to success. Four of us met that goal our first few hours in Mt. Pleasant when our trainer's car was broken into. I was essentially left with the clothes I was wearing and a wallet that had little in it. The first day in my new community was quite the experience, especially since no one knew where they would be placed until the last morning of training when project assignments were made. Housing was also prearranged for us with local families until we found our own - which took about three weeks. Twenty-four-seven was somewhat real, given what I ended up doing.

I joined VISTA after graduate school, having majored in political science with emphasis on urban affairs. Frankly (and surprisingly), my college years prepared me for moving into a low-income inner city community, accepting (and being accepted by) people of diverse backgrounds, and having understanding and empathy for urban problems. The neighborhood during that time was predominantly African American with some Latinos. My main challenge was to find something to do for a year as there were no volunteer assignment descriptions. To make matters more uncertain, the sponsoring organization didn't really exist. We had an office in the basement of the Mt. Pleasant Library and that was about all the structure provided to VISTAs.

Somehow welfare rights came knocking on my door. I became a community organizer. I'm not sure if the D.C. Welfare Department, and its dysfunctional bureaucracy, was any better after my service ended, but we kept them on their toes. VISTAs formed a team that enabled many welfare recipients to stand up for their rights and for decent treatment for themselves and their children. The children—I loved the kids—called me “Mr. Paul.”

What remained in the community at the end of the year (in addition to my first day contribution--which I view as a worthwhile learning experience):

- A stronger National Welfare Rights Chapter serving Mt. Pleasant.
- Transfer of skills to members of the chapter.
- A directory of community services published in English and Spanish, a first for any D.C. neighborhood.
- A community survey to all households to identify needs and developing strategies to address those needs.
- An understanding that people of different backgrounds and races can come together to fight for social and economic justice.

What I learned:

- Regardless of one's educational or socioeconomic background, everyone has a skill set and knowledge that contributes to achieving an organizational goal.
- Most people accept you for what you are if you accept them for who they are.
- With preparation, persistence, and organization change happens.
- Collaboration and citizen involvement are the keys to a viable community.
- It is better to listen first, and then talk when entering a new community.
- The mere fact that a VISTA from outside lives in the community and walks on the streets is significant.

VISTA service was different in that era than compared to today. The '60s and '70s were turbulent times because people were fighting for social and economic justice and racial equality. Today, VISTAs can still transform challenges into opportunities to serve, to learn and to make a difference. In 1971, Washington Redskins Football

coach, George Allen, said, "The Future is Now." Indeed it is!

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Frequently Asked Questions:

Q: What is the Viewfinder?

A: VISTA means view-looking out on a broad expanse. The viewfinder, a toy that all generations of VISTAs recognize, was a kind of binocular that focused on points of interest, highlights, and snapshots in living color. The VISTA Viewfinder surveys in the landscape and zeroes in on service.

Q. Why the Viewfinder?

A. Here's your direct link to connecting with other VISTAs, learning what they are doing, and helping to spread the message of VISTA and national service!

Q. How can I contribute?

A. Have a story to tell? Submission ideas? Contact vistaoutreach@cns.gov. Use the Viewfinder to highlight your VISTA service and share your experiences with others across the country!

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