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TRANSITION

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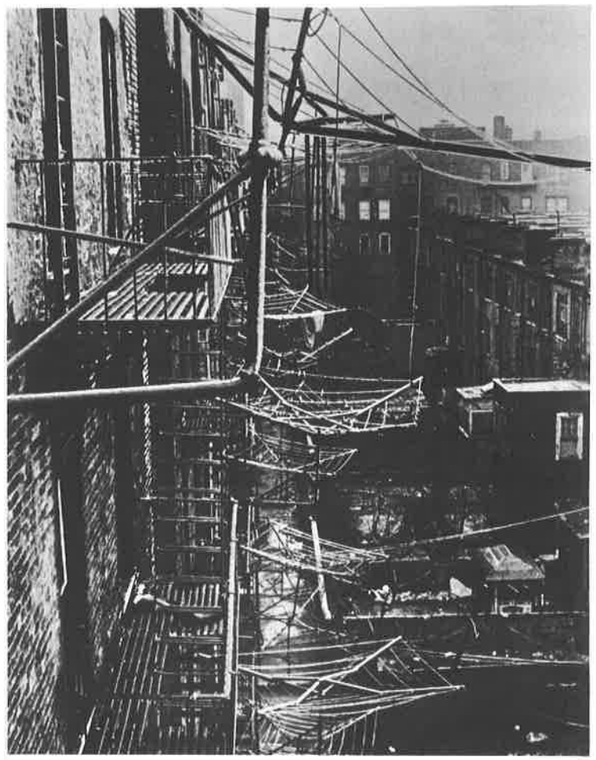
The Spirit of VISTA

DRUGS: Two Approaches

ACTION REGION II

(Beginning with this issue, TRANSITION will focus on one region and some of the ACTION programs in that region.)

S.E.R.A.'s War on Drugs in 'Little Korea'



It's known as "Little Korea"—an area in the Bronx, New York bounded by Hoe and Aldus Avenues, Southern Boulevard, and Fox, Tiffany and Simpson Street.

Like other communities, it has families, stores, churches and schools. But it has other distinctions which set it apart:

- one out of every five residents is a heroin user
- one-third of the residents are welfare recipients
- there are over a hundred abandoned buildings
- fifteen out of every hundred youths between the ages of seven and twenty years have been arrested for delinquency offenses.

In an effort to organize the community to stem its destruction by drugs, the Hispanic Association for a Free Society set up the Service for Education and Rehabilitation in Addiction (S.E.R.A.). Funded by the New York State Narcotic Addiction Control Commission, S.E.R.A. attempts to reach both the "acting out" youngsters and the hard-core addict, train relatives and concerned citizens about the drug abuse problem and solicit help in a community effort.

S.E.R.A.'s program is five-pronged: an induction center, a therapeutic community, a day care center, a community organization and development component and a youth treatment component.

At the induction center, using addicts are confronted and challenged by workers who are former addicts. The using addicts then maintain liaison with hospitals offering detoxification, a process that takes from three to five days.

At the therapeutic center, the addict commits himself to rehabilitation for three to six months.

At the day care center, the detoxified addict moves through three phases of his transition to his home life.

The community organization and development component sends trained bilingual workers into the community in an effort to provide orientation and information about S.E.R.A.'s services.

The youth treatment component seeks to catch the youngsters who are known experimenters with drugs and educate them to the dangers of drugs before they become hard-core addicts.

This is the environment and program into which three VISTA volunteers were recently assigned. The three—J. Kevin Lambert, Pat Wilson and Mary Sundberg—describe their experiences with S.E.R.A.

A VISTA Report

by J. Kevin Lambert

I had requested an inner city setting on my VISTA application so I was not at all disappointed when I was assigned to New York.

When I was further assigned to S.E.R.A., I was at first upset because of my lack of knowledge of hard drugs or drug addicts. However, my initial regrets were quickly alleviated when my assignment at S.E.R.A. was with the volunteer department.

This is the department in charge of training and organizing community groups, recruiting people to work on a part-time volunteer basis for the house, and establishing a rapport between the program and the parents of residents in the program.

So I soon found myself far from my white middle class background. I am from the suburbs of Long Island and have attended 17 years of Catholic school. My familiarity with an urban ghetto, the nature of the southern Bronx was no more than you can get from newspapers, television or books.

The S.E.R.A. program and training helped enable me to make a somewhat rapid adjustment to a new environment. After the totally inadequate VISTA training was finished, S.E.R.A. put me into their therapeutic community for a two week period.

I was to be treated as a resident and given the same work schedules and rigorous discipline.

Through this I became somewhat accepted by the resident addicts as a person, rather than merely a square or non-user of drugs. Through long conversations, I learned much about the life of an addict and life in South Bronx in general.

S.E.R.A. not only is interested in rehabilitating the drug addict, but also is interested in rehabilitating the social environment in which the addict lives. Since the number of addicts is increasing yearly, preventon is the most important aspect of the drug solution.

My activities include a) training parents, husbands, wives and relatives of S.E.R.A. residents in the workings of the S.E.R.A. program and in drug education and prevention. b) training interested community people in drugs and their use. c) training community groups in the use of their local resources (tenants rights, youth counseling, etc.) d) speaking to school groups (students, teachers, P.T.A.) on drug prevention.

I am also presently working on setting up two new programs here at S.E.R.A. One is a tenant action program which will place its emphasis on training and organizing tenants to help themselves by organizing their buildings and their using the legal and public services available to them to effect change for themselves. The second program calls for the setting up of community centers throughout South Bronx in basements and storefronts. These centers will be staffed by trained volunteers and will offer the following services to the community:

1) Drug education
2) Classes in English as a second language and preparation classes for the High School Equivalency Test.
3) Legal rights information (tenant, welfare)
4) Social and recreational activities
5) Day care facilities for children
6) Other related community services.

My goal before I entered Vista was, in the broad sense, to effect some kind of change for the poor in the United States. I was and still am convinced that this change can come only as a result of a combined effort by both the people who control the "system" and the poor themselves.

The problem is that the poor are ill prepared through years of oppression and neglect to compete with the middle or upper classes. An effort must be made by people who know well the conditions of the poor and are in a position to fight or work with the "system" to close this gap.

I would like to become fully aware of and involved with the conditions of the poor and go to law school to obtain a law degree. With this law degree I hope that I can find a way to work within the system to change the system to one which responds more readily to all of its people.

ME IN S.E.R.A.

by Pat Wilson

I came to S.E.R.A. on September 22, 1971, as a VISTA Volunteer. I didn't know what it would be like to live and work with people who have been on drugs for most of their lives. I didn't know what to say or do.

After living, eating, sleeping and talking with them, I have gotten to know them very well. I also feel loved, needed and wanted. I feel that I am doing something to help these people here. I think that they are very happy to have me here.

I also hope that before I leave, I will be able to help just one person (if not more) to do something that they have always wanted to do, but never got to do because they were on drugs.

Living in the ghetto is something within itself. I never know if I will be hit on the head, raped, shot, killed or what, nor do I know if my house will be robbed when I get home. But when I get to work, I don't care because S.E.R.A. is like going home to a safe place where you can just get involved. So I am not very afraid to walk at night.

I have learned a lot from these people and I have also learned what to do, the places to go, and things to say, to stay out of trouble.

I think that S.E.R.A. is doing a very good thing, and they have helped quite a few people in the short time that I have been here. Quite a few people who have finished the program are now married and working and doing their thing.

We need more VISTAs to come and work here, to give of their time as I have done, to let these people here know that not only ex-addicts care, but people who haven't been on drugs care, and want to help them.

SERA's War on Drugs

by Mary Sundberg

I must admit that my motives for joining VISTA were not the highest. In fact, the noble sentiments generally attributed to VISTAs have been my greatest embarrassment this year. Sentiments without skill are generally naive, if not useless. And high motives usually fall short on honesty.

So you strip yourself of these trappings, and find yourself a little poorer (just you, no halo, and very much like those people you always thought of as "Other"). I guess that's the way VISTA has been a poverty experience

But it's a very slow thing, this looking at your naked self, till you see the skin. And the people who touch you—some are rough, some gentle—they make you feel yourself, and they show you how they need to be touched.

That's the feeling. And how did the feeling happen? Coming to New York City was the worst culture shock devised for someone coming back from a year and a half in rural Wisconsin and the Canadian woods. New York still gives me headaches, and wears down my teeth from the gritting. But I came, to try.

The first weeks of training didn't calm my nerves. The trainers specialized in sensitivity, and since we had an enlightened, learn-by-doing setting, we learned to relate to other VISTAs. The three weeks crept by.

But the initiation was worth waiting through. After that, you relate to the sponsoring agency. Mine is a bilingual drug rehabilitation program in the South Bronx. I was told I was lucky to be assigned to S.E.R.A., that it is the best agency in the region. And I tend to agree.

The program's about a year and a half old, and already minor miracles have been accomplished. But laurels mean nothing; there's a world outside the door that's barely begun to be reached. That keeps lots of ideas coming, and lots of hard work to effect them.

There's a sense of purpose about the place, and it's not hard to get caught up in it. Of course, no situation is perfect. I've had a little trouble adjusting to the paper work ("if it's not in writing it's not true"), and to getting there at 9:00 and not 9:01. But I guess those things keep it going as much as the spirit of the place does.

The first two weeks at S.E.R.A. were spent in their version of training, this time very relevant. We lived in the therapeutic community, being treated like any other resident, with the same duties and responsibilities, confrontations in encounters, frustrations and revelations of an intensive therapy setting.

I learned a lot in those two weeks. Most important was getting to know the residents, personally. That's a completely other dimension, and completely different from the social psychology of any other approach. You get to know some people, and you share things, of yourself, of experiences, of deep feelings.

And then, a long time later, you connect that with their being people who used drugs, and you begin to understand. But first, you know some people, and that is what you treasure.

The weeks in the therapeutic community were also a chance to do some soul-searching, especially about why I was in this situation. I knew it was not to save the world, but I didn't know what the reasons were.

Those two weeks helped me discover the needs and motivations behind my working in social service, in a community organization. I also had a chance to re-examine my values, which made some revisions to New York style living a little bit smoother.

The following months at S.E.R.A. have been very full, both in my work (job developing and placement) and in my personal relationships.

But this is something that happens, in its unique way, in every new experience. It is not my VISTA experience, but my experience working for S.E.R.A. VISTA did its job in placing me in S.E.R.A., and its function ended (except for things like stipend) with the training.

S.E.R.A. is there every day, with its challenges and frustrations, its people and its paper, with employees and job freezes and training programs, with ex-addicts and their relatives and friends and neighbors.

There's Hoe Avenue and Hunts Point and South Bronx, and that's a long story I'll tell when I'm old.

VISTA on Rikers Island

From Jail Back to Society

From Region II Acting Director George Fox comes this story of a prison counseling-employment program and the impressions of three volunteers who worked in it.

Numerous studies have shown that helping the prison releasee move back into the community through finding a place for him to live, restoring family ties, and securing job placement not only alleviates some of the prisoner's fears about this "traumatic experience," but also significantly reduces the rate of recidivism, i.e., the rate of return to prison.

For a released man the first twenty-four hours of freedom are critical to his future . . .

At Rikers Island (N.Y.) Reformatory, preparation for this critical time begins two or three months before the offender is scheduled to be released.

At that time, VISTA Volunteers assigned to the New York Department of Corrections begin meeting with prospective releasees in a counseling-employment program. Each VISTA works with four to ten inmates, counseling each for at least forty-five minutes a week. Through this counseling, the Volunteer works with the inmate to help him identify his problems and interests, and to design a program which will help the offender face the reality of the world outside the prison gates.

One of the first things a Volunteer may do to make the offender's transition back into the community easier is to restore family ties which are often severed by the prison experience. Since all of the inmates of the reformatory are adolescents, many of them will be returning to their homes upon release. In some cases, the families of offenders have been their victims as well, particularly in those instances where the youngster was on drugs and stole from other members of his family to support his habit. The VISTA tries to work with the family to "patch things up" before the releasee returns to his home.

At other times, the Volunteer might check on family problems which have been worrying the inmate. He also encourages family members to visit the reformatory. At Rikers Island, an inmate may have only one visitor per week on Saturday and Sunday mornings. This limited visitation schedule, plus the remoteness of the island reformatory from the inmates' homes, make family visits very difficult.

A second area where the VISTA tries to help is locating employment for each releasee, a task which is complicated by the depressed job market.

Three VISTA Volunteers describe their experiences with the VISTA Rikers Island Project in New York City and how the work in the reformatory affected them and the prisoners with whom they worked.

Honesty and Trust Can Pay Off

by John Patrus

A typical brochure job description often offers a mere simplification of one's working activities. As a VISTA Volunteer working in the Rikers Island Penal Institution of N.Y C., I would describe myself as a rehabilitative counselor with a caseload of roughly 25.

It is my personal conviction that the days, months, and perhaps years of penal incarceration may exemplify a subtle yet very real form of psychological brutality, evolving within the misguided auspices of corrections itself.

Must this situation remain a young man's almost inevitable destiny because of his life in urban squalor? Hopefully, as a VISTA counselor, I may be able to modify this negative possibility.

What can a VISTA do as one well-motivated yet inexperienced individual from literally another world in most instances? The answer—little if anything, unless you are willing to approach "VISTA Rikers Island Experience" within the following context:

As a National Pool Volunteer, you must realize that your background, interests, objectives, and racial heritage may represent a substantial disparity between what you are willing and able to do, and what you are likely to accomplish. To me, a possible and essential moderation of these differences can occur through the understanding, belief in, and application of the *advocacy approach* to VISTA counseling. What exactly does this approach represent?

After seven months of trying to answer this question, I find my answer goes something like this—advocacy in personal counseling necessitates the reinforcement of whatever positive interests, qualities, and realistic desires the incarcerated individual is *willing to share* with you. Moreover, it is the counselor's first priority to maintain the inmates' trust through his recognition of what things seem positive and realistic *to the inmate* himself. In doing this, the voluntary aspect of the VISTA Rikers Island Project can prosper.

Finally, perhaps, there is no set of answers or collective panacea for the National Pool VISTA counselor dealing with individuals whose very past, present, and future suggest the antitheses of his own. However, there is one absolute which may be of invaluable usage in this isolated VISTA experience:

An honest appreciation of what you are and represent as a VISTA Volunteer must remain in an open relationship with the very same essential facts about your clients.

An Awakening to People

by C. Miller

It is very hard after almost eighteen months of working in the South Bronx with young men being released from Rikers Island to give an overview of the experience.

Certainly the first year, which was spent working directly with inmates and ex-inmates was the most emotionally involving.

Some, a few, were clearly successful: either in making personal progress with schooling, a job, a drug problem, etc., or in finding a role in social or political action within the community. An even smaller number were clearly unsuccessful—re-arrested.

The vast majority, however, are simply still out of jail. The conditions of their lives have not really changed; one can only hope to have encouraged different responses to those conditions. In working with prospective releasees, there is usually no great corner to be turned or dramatic crises to overcome. They just have to be willing to keep coping with the same pressures that they have always had.

For the last few months I have been involved in general resource work for the project. I have been attempting to develop mechanisms and resources to satisfy the sort of needs shared by ex-offenders. This has been more of change from working with the individuals than I had imagined. Much that then could be cajoled, lied about, or arranged as an exception, must now be made acceptable as the rule.

It has been an education. Once I would have found it incredible that vast government and social programs could ignore or fail to deal with large categories of persons. But no longer.

The greatest area of frustration, though, is not with the bureaucrats but in our failure to reach the general population of the community more effectively; to develop and apply their capabilities to the task.

The loss is not only to the people we work with, but also to those who could work so much more effectively with them if we could find the way.

The problem with an overview is that it outlines the problems and pressures without being able to focus upon the individual contacts that provide the incentive and reward.

For me it has been the people that I have worked with and not the problems that has mattered.

One Man Reclaimed

by Mark McTernan

Mike was 18 years old when he was arrested and charged with robbery. Because he was unable to make bond, he was sent to the Rikers Island Remand Shelter. After six months of pre-trial incarceration, he was ready to plead guilty.

Without ever going to trial, Mike was found guilty of attempted grand larceny and sentenced to a 3-year indefinite sentence. He served 18 months of this sentence before being paroled in the fall of 1971.

I've known Mike for over a year. We met on Rikers a month prior to his release. In that time we reached one very necessary goal. We learned to trust each other.

When Mike was paroled, he came to our offices looking for a job. He knew what he wanted.

Our job was to show him the opportunities we could make available. I told him about our Texaco Training Program. He decided to enter it the following week.

Since that time Mike has taken care of himself. He's now a full-time employee of Texaco.

Next month he's getting married and moving into his new apartment.

Mike had the motivation needed to help himself. The combination of that motivation with our training program meant success.