

VISTA



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Published in recognition of 70,000 men and women from all walks of life who have served their country as VISTA volunteers during the past 15 years.

*Volunteers in Service to America
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A Message from President Jimmy Carter

As someone who grew up in the Great Depression, I saw what poverty is all about. I saw what unemployment and deprivation did to people. I saw too what a small amount of assistance could accomplish—particularly in a hard-hit region like the South.

Today there are still areas of our country that suffer severe poverty and alienation. There are still Americans who hunger for friendship, for the kind of *mutual* assistance that so characterized the New Deal. Fortunately there are still volunteers within each community who are willing to provide this help. They work in VISTA.

It was fifteen years ago that President Lyndon Johnson got the VISTA program underway. Since that time, seventy thousand volunteers have recruited many times that number of Americans to work in helping their communities improve themselves.

I want all VISTA volunteers to know that I am one President who appreciates the work that you have done. I am determined that this good work continue—and *expand*—in the years to come.



Self-Help: New Roots to an Old Idea

by Sam Brown, ACTION Director

In 1965, when I first heard about VISTA, I was beginning to be a little suspicious of everything the federal government was doing. America was beginning to become involved in Vietnam, and the great social legislation that would make 1965 such a historic year had yet to be passed. The Civil Rights Act of 1965 was not law, Medicare had yet to be enacted, and "anti-poverty" programs were being vetoed by governors. I didn't know much about VISTA at the time but I thought that in sending VISTA volunteers—mostly young college students—to help poor people, the federal government had found the perfect pacifier: Who could resist the notion of idealistic young people doing good?

Poor people who needed so much help, who needed the vote, the right to be heard, an economic leg up seemed to be getting only the idealism of a couple of thousand volunteers. I didn't think Congress would pass much of the legislation that President Johnson had sent to it. I assumed that the governors who

didn't like the "anti-poverty" programs would go right on vetoing them. The War on Poverty seemed a cruel hoax.

I thought then that the scale of help being provided was all out of proportion to the problems. Two thousand volunteers trying to help 32 million poor people? In Appalachia, the coal companies would still get the profits, the coal miners would still get black lung. In the Deep South, blacks might get political freedom, but how would they climb up the economic ladder? In the grand scheme of things I didn't see how VISTA volunteers committed to one year of service would be of much help. I wasn't impressed.

A few years later, in 1969, I was in Washington and went around to see friends at the National Welfare Rights Organization. There I met my first VISTA volunteer, Tom Glynn, who later came back to work at ACTION in 1977-78 as the Director of Policy and Planning. Finding one VISTA volunteer working for an organization like National Welfare Rights was

interesting; finding a lot of them was surprising. Clearly, I didn't know much about VISTA.

In time, Tom and a few other VISTAs got some facts into my head about what VISTA did to help poor people. I came away thinking that VISTA was a very odd program and a very good one for the federal government to be running. I wasn't sure it would ever be understood or ever be popular. VISTA was obviously not your ordinary government program. VISTA was more a process than a program: a belief in the democratic idea that people ought to be involved in the decisionmaking process regardless of who they were or what they owned.

VISTA had other attributes that some people thought were a problem. By 1969, VISTA volunteers had a reputation of being the shock troops of the war on poverty. Whether they were good soldiers or won battles was sometimes in doubt. What was not in doubt was the fact that VISTAs were shocking some people. Citizen participation, the belief in the "maximum feasible participation" of poor people



At the heart of VISTA is a commitment to the welfare of one's fellow man, and its lifeblood, the dedication and compassion of the men and women who are at work on its behalf.

For fifteen years, VISTA volunteers have demonstrated the true spirit and the substance of brotherhood. They have made a difference in many lives, bringing help and hope to those locked in the wrenching vise of poverty and despair, and carrying in a very personal way the promise of this great democracy to the unfortunate.

Lady Bird Johnson



in the decisionmaking process, came across as a very democratic idea when you read about it in the legislative language.

But when citizen participation turned out to be a rent strike in Chicago over rats in public housing, a bail bond project in Tulsa, a campaign in West Virginia to make the coal companies pay compensation to black lung victims, and organizing welfare recipients in Philadelphia to get what was entitled to them by law, well, that was a different ball game. A great many people didn't like the score. VISTA, for being so small a federal program, had a great many people who wanted to call it "out." I wondered if VISTA would survive in the years to come.

VISTA did survive, in large part because a great many good people in

the program and in the Congress fought the bureaucratic wars that had to be fought to make sure the program had a future. When I became the Director of ACTION in 1977, I discovered just how close VISTA had come to not surviving; there was no request in the federal budget for money for the next year and some of the volunteers, all talented people, were being restricted more and more to administrative jobs in social service agencies. Gone was the emphasis on citizen participation. Gone was the idea of poor people helping themselves. VISTA, one of the government's most unusual programs, was on its way to becoming quite ordinary.

That was three years ago. With strong support from President Carter, VISTA is changing. The volunteers are different, how they do what they

do is different, and the renewed emphasis on self-help—on poor people helping themselves—is starting to take hold. VISTA isn't what it used to be—30% of the 3,900 volunteers are non-white, 15% are over 65 years of age; and at least 70% are now recruited from their local communities. Gone are the days when VISTA only recruited on college campuses.

Fifteen years after it first began, VISTA is putting down new roots to an old idea about how poor people who need help should be helped. In 1980 VISTA is a program, a process, and most importantly, a belief in the idea that the form of government which prevails ought to be one that encourages self-help—that allows people to define what they can do and should do for themselves, and what the government should and must do to protect the integrity and economic dignity of each individual.

Ever since the New Deal began, the federal government has been creating social service programs for poor people. They were needed, and to a large extent they have been successful. There are millions of people who are better off today because of Medicare, Head Start, and other social programs. But, bit by bit, the cumulative effect of all these programs has been to strip away from individuals the sure sense that they have control over their own lives.

Despite our best intentions, we have encouraged the poor to be dependent which in turn has made them objects of scorn for those who wish to scorn them. Instead of encouraging the poor to help themselves we have told them to wait for the federal grant or the expert solution that is sure to come. Too few government programs

reward the self-reliance of the poor. Too many helping programs encourage "giving up" in order to become eligible for assistance. We have, in short, created a system of helping that encourages the poor to be passive rather than active, dependent rather than self-reliant, recipients rather than producers, clients instead of people proud of their own work. We have divided the poor from the working, even though the poor are the most self-reliant people in America and have to be in order to survive. We have allowed those who wish to scorn the poor the opportunity to foster the myth that poor people will not pull their own weight.

VISTA's commitment to self-help reflects our belief that self-help is a direct and powerful way of destroying that myth. You can't call someone "shiftless" if they are building their own house, farming their own land, or producing their own energy. You can't blame the poor for inflation or all the other ills of our society if they are striving to be self-reliant as members of a farm co-op or a self-help group. VISTA is trying, and we think succeeding in giving poor people back their citizenship; their belief that they can help themselves and have lives of dignity without being overly dependent on government expertise or the helping professions.

Self-help isn't the total answer to helping poor people. The larger social programs which give people certainty that help is available won't disappear and shouldn't. They can, however, be encouraged to allow those poor people who can, that measure of dignity and authority as citizens that comes from helping themselves. Self-help ought to be seen in a larger context, as the



core around which a vision can be built of a society in which justice, equity, and integrity are the common denominators and not the exception. That vision may be found in the words written by Walt Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*:

"The mission of government, henceforth, in civilized land, is not repression alone, and not authority alone, not even of law, nor by that favorite standard of the eminent writer, the rule of the best men, the born heroes and captains of the race . . . but higher than the highest authority, (the mission of government is) to train

communities through all their grades, beginning with individuals and ending there again, to rule themselves."

The work of VISTA's 70,000 volunteers, past and present, like the roots of a great tree, has sustained and continues to nurture our belief that all people, even those at the margin of our society, can, if given some help and encouragement, "rule themselves."

The good health of our society, ultimately, isn't measured by how many McDonald's hamburgers we eat. Progress in our society isn't measured by the Nielsen ratings. The true measure of what makes a country great is its commitment to justice and equity for those who have been left out and left behind—for those people at the margin of society. VISTA volunteers work at that margin. In doing so, they encourage the poor and give thousands of other Americans a sense of shared commitment that by helping others to help themselves the moral dimensions of their own lives and the social dimensions of our society can be expanded.

America's future in the 1980s, like it has so often in the past, depends on the success of those who live at the margin and those Americans, like our VISTA volunteers, who live with them. The great lesson of the last 15 years is that America becomes a better country when those at the margin strengthen their self-confidence "to rule themselves" and they, in turn, sustain and nurture our sense of community by becoming part of it. Helping people at the margin to accomplish that task is VISTA's contribution to America's future. You have to be impressed.

The Many Faces of Poverty

All across America, tucked away in folds of land, or along watercourses, or under trees, are little clusters of cabins, shanties, shacks, that hardly anyone sees. These clusters rarely have names, and they don't show up on maps. They are camouflaged, their precarious wood and metal roofs and walls turned rusty gray or dull brown, blending with the land. The people who live in these gatherings share the grays and the browns—in their eyes, in their skin, in their clothes.

Inside, extra clothing, when there is any, hangs from nails on plywood walls. Pages from newspapers or mail-order catalogues plaster the cracks and keep out some of the wind. A bed or two, old and creaking, sleeps as many as 10, while a battered and belching stove, fruit crate chairs, and a hand-made table make up the basic furniture. The people who live here work on some nearby farms, as the season calls them, or in a neighboring town, if and when they can find work.

Outside Lorain, Ohio, there are two such settlements. In wet weather, the low-lying shacks flood with debris and dirty water that have to be swept into the open drainage ditches outside. In dry spells, savage fires rip through the shacks, unchecked and uncontrollable in a community with no running water, no fire hydrants, and no fire company.

Each family is supposed to have a water tank, with a capacity of hundreds of gallons of water. Water, however, costs money, something the poor do not always have. So it is rare when a tank holds sufficient water to put out the fires which start each winter in the kerosene-lit, wood-burning, coal-cooking households. A retired railroad worker, gray-haired,

brown-skinned, points to the charred remains of a cabin, and speaks of a mother who went out to get drunk, leaving her seven children locked up. Five of them died in the fire.

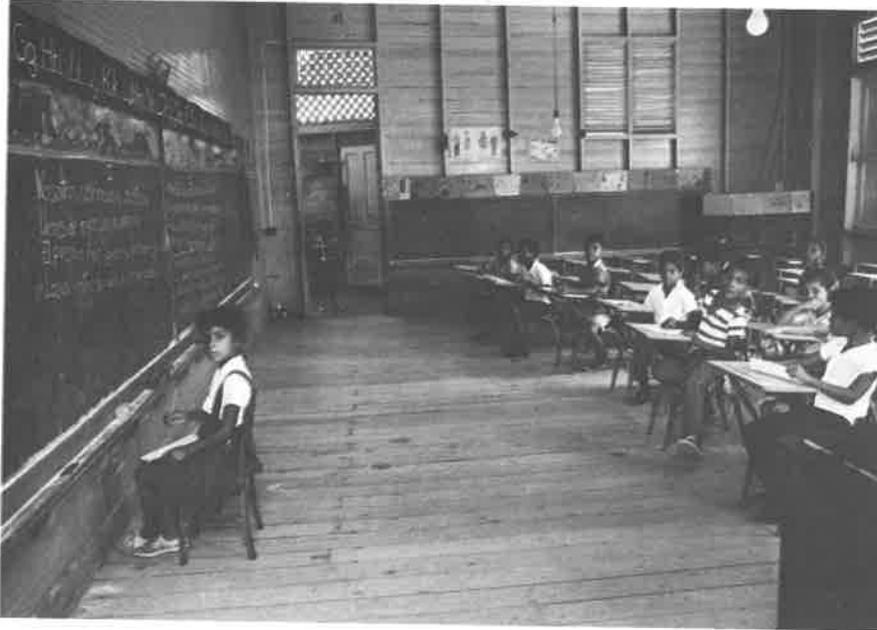
"She shouldn't drink, God knows, but it still ain't right that the kids should pay for her sins. If we could get some money to hire some old grannies to babysit while the mother's out, maybe we could talk the women into going after jobs, or back to school. Anything's better than seeing these kids getting killed every winter."

Those cabins, the colors of the land, are scattered up and down the hollows and creek bottoms of Appalachia. But there, the huts aren't quite so hidden because people came to see Appalachia in the early 1960s. They had read a book or two about it, and couldn't quite believe the poverty through the written words. But the visitors went away shocked and indignant, and their editorials and on-camera commentaries sparked two Presidents into a war on poverty.

One of the early champions of the poor was a reporter named Homer Bigart, who came to Appalachia in 1963 with his copy of Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberland*s. Bigart found gasping coal miners coughing their lives out in cluttered cabins in the hollows. He saw the pinched faces of coal miners' daughters and sons bent over dog-eared ancient texts in dilapidated one-room schools. Bigart quoted a county health doctor who described children so hungry they ate the dried mud from between the rocks of chimneys. Staring starkly from the front page of the *New York Times* was the plight of miners whose day at the working face in low coal paid only six







or eight dollars a day, and often cost them their lives.

Not much had changed since the 1930s, when writers' committees headed by Theodore Dreiser and others came down to Harlan County, Kentucky, and went away horrified. The media rediscovery of Appalachia that followed Bigart's footsteps climaxed with a 1963 CBS television special on "Christmas in Appalachia." A neighborhood merchant in CBS's chosen hollow explained to an incredulous Charles Kuralt that his customers would starve to death unless he sold them food on credit, and since they could never pay, his own destitution and starvation were assured. "I guess," he said matter of factly, "we will all just starve together."

A schoolteacher, who shepherded first through eighth grades in a single room, gave another observer her own

summary of the poverty there. One of her second graders was thumbing through a battered copy of *National Geographic* and stopped in the middle of a colorful pictorial on India, full of Taj Mahals, textiles, and tigers. The child pointed to a photograph of some obviously poor Indians and said they reminded her of her daddy.

A former VISTA volunteer tells another story. "On the Interstate that runs from New Orleans to Atlanta, an 80-year-old woman lives alone in a shack by the roadside. If you drive along that road, you see her sometimes, going painfully along in the tall grass beside the highway. She's looking for the Coke bottles the motorists throw out the windows of their cars as they pass at 70 miles an hour. Tomorrow a child will come by her shack to collect the bottles and bring them to the grocery store downtown. Then

she'll bring the three cents a bottle she gets, back to the old woman to buy food."

In the cities, there are other, almost universal scenes. The halls of a tenement building on the west side of Manhattan smells of fermenting garbage and the residue of a thousand drunks. Shredded carpet, pitted walls, peeling paint, and dangling pipes reflect the shredded, pitted, peeling, dangling lives of the people. The manager watches the lobby through a thick steel mesh, behind a door bolted with three locks. "Nobody goes out on the street after dark," he warns. "About the only thing holding this building up is the locks. I don't know why, ain't nothing worth stealing that hadn't already been stole." Upstairs, no one notices that you can see the Hudson River from the windows.



The official measure of poverty in America classifies approximately 25 million as poor, or more than one in 10 Americans. Even that figure may understate the position of the poor. The economist who originally developed the poverty index estimated, in 1978, that 10 million more Americans would be listed as poor if the index's food budget were based on more realistic nutritional needs and up-to-date spending patterns. And if the poverty line paralleled the "lower budget" level of need established by the Bureau of Labor Standards, one quarter of all Americans would fall below that line.

Some recent studies have advocated counting the government's in-kind payments to the poor (such as food



stamps, medical benefits, child nutrition payments, and housing assistance) as cash income, thus reducing poverty in America by a statistical sleight of hand. The Center for Community Change noted in 1979 that while programs like food stamps do improve the income position of the poor, they are far different from providing an equivalent amount of cash, and other programs end up providing cash benefits to third party vendors (such as doctors and landlords), not to the poor themselves.

The War on Poverty has been termed a success on the basis of numbers. When President Johnson made his 1964 proclamation, over 33 million Americans were officially designated as poor. That number declined to 25 million by 1968 and has stayed there ever since. But even that "official" progress is illusory. During the 1960s, according to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the standard of living of the poor declined in relation to that of higher income people. And by 1974 the relative gap between rich and poor had increased by 23 percent.

Analyzing Poverty

The basic cause of poverty has always been lack of employment—far fewer jobs than there are people who need them. In early 1980, the national unemployment rate was pegged at slightly over six percent, or more than six million people. But the National Urban League points out that these figures only count people who are actively looking for work. If the figures included people who had part-time jobs but needed full-time work, along with those so discouraged they had given up looking for work, the

League estimates that unemployment would exceed 15 percent.

But for some observers, the only way to make sense of the hopelessness, of the dreadful inertia accompanying poverty is to place full responsibility on the "culture of poverty," or more often, on the "sub-culture." Accompanying this analysis comes all the discouraging adjectives for poor people: unreachable, disadvantaged, primitive, parochial, isolated, backward, deprived, fundamentally different in their values and goals. Leonard Goodwin's *Do The Poor Really Want to Work?*, however, concludes that the poor and the non-poor are not different in their goals or hopes or the ethic they define, but in their different experience of success and failure in the world. Job rebuffs from lack of experience or education, personal humiliations from lack of food or clothing or shelter often convince poor people of their own inadequacies. Eventually many stop trying.

But the hopelessness engendered by poverty is rarely absolute. One of the most perceptive observers of poor people, and certainly the most consistent in letting them speak for themselves, is Robert Coles. He writes:

"If I have learned anything from the work I've done with migrant farmers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and mountain families, it is that the people 'we' consider so distant and backward, may well be more capable of changing themselves than our nation is of changing itself. Of course, despair and hostility appear regularly among people who are hungry and have no significant work. Yet, given a chance, 'they' don't have to be that way. I've seen enough to know that."

"It was the way they went about doing this that got us feeling drawn to it, I'd say. . . . They probably saw they got us going too fast, and that we'd be real, honest-to-goodness practising citizens of the USA, and they never have allowed that here, and maybe up in Washington they're not ready for it either."

A Mississippi welfare mother, in 1966

History has a way of obscuring even the purest and most powerful ideas. To be "real, honest-to-goodness practising citizens of the USA" is, for *all* this nation's people, the ideal consequence of what the founding fathers had originally intended. But in the leapfrogging economic and cultural change of a new country seeking to mature, that ideal became lost to certain fragile segments of the population. That process of loss—and the need for redemption—is what led to VISTA.

The promise of full citizenship is as old as the American republic. The American Revolution was fought over the colonists' rights to self-determination, and the subsequent organization of government was shaped by a continuing debate over the forms and levels of citizen involvement in government. Thomas Jefferson, the democrat who urged decentralization, squared off against Alexander Hamilton, whose first priority was efficient administration. Jefferson won by outliving Hamilton long enough to define the issues for succeeding generations:

"Men by their constitutions are naturally divided into two parties: (1) Those who fear and distrust the people, and wish to draw all powers from

Thousands and thousands of our neediest families have been helped through the unselfish efforts of our VISTA volunteers. The VISTA program has, time and time again, proven to be a wise Federal investment, with the resulting benefits far outdistancing a relative minimal expenditure. More importantly, however, the program has provided an opportunity for Americans of all ages to aid their fellow-Americans. We owe these many volunteers a debt of gratitude for their dedicated and hard work during the last 15 years.

Congressman Carl Perkins (D-KY)



them into the hands of the higher classes. (2) Those who identify themselves with the people, have confidence in them, cherish and consider them as the most honest and sane, although not the most wise, depository of the public interests. . . . If we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take from them, but to inform their discretion.”

The French observer Alexis de Tocqueville wrote his *Democracy in America* as a paean and critique of Jefferson’s vision and America’s reality. At the same time de Tocqueville warned: “It must not be forgotten that it is especially dangerous to enslave men in the minor details of life. For my own part, I should be inclined to think freedom less necessary in great things than in little ones, if it were possible to be secure of the one without possessing the other.”

Greater Centralization of Power

Material conditions have made a prophet of de Tocqueville by taking Hamilton’s vision of efficient, centralized administration far beyond anything he had ever dreamed. The trends in both business and government over the past century and a half have all pointed to greater and greater centralization of power. In the late 1800s, business managers found unlimited profit potential in monopoly and oligopoly, and transformed much of the economic system by combining companies into trusts, conglomerates, and giant corporations in a process that continues today. The locus of important economic decisionmaking shifted from the local market or the

paternal employer to corporate headquarters hundreds, even thousands, of miles away, with little stake in the community. Corporations began to resemble economic colonialists—exporting their profits and leaving their losses behind.

This is not to say that paternalistic economics were devoutly wished, or to deny that business centralization has, through economic growth and mass production, liberated much of human energy for other tasks. Rather, the point is to identify a certain distancing between citizens and the decisionmaking that affects their lives.

Government has done its part, as well, to shred the “social contract” for full citizenship. Ever since the New Deal, the federal government has been creating programs in response to emergencies, perceived needs, and continuing efforts to make society more equitable. These programs were greatly needed, and to a large extent they have succeeded in putting a floor under the economy and safety nets under the poor. But for individual citizens, the cumulative effect of federal intervention has been to erode, slowly but surely, the sense that by their participation in such programs, people will have control over their own destinies. Americans, and especially poor Americans, have come to believe that their very sense of self-hood—their identity as individuals and citizens—has been taken away from them. The poor have found the public and private agencies with which they have dealt to be remote in physical location, rigid in their procedures, difficult to establish communication with, unempathetic and often hostile in their attitudes, and at times, openly racist.



The Riptides of Change

As the 1960s approached, what Paul Ylvisacker has called “concurrent riptides of change” had been mounting since World War II. The post-war baby boom was cascading the raw energy and anger of millions of teenagers annually onto the American scene. Concurrently, there were the great population movements—the upwardly mobile middle class migrating from obsolescent central cities into burgeoning suburbs while those who hoped to improve their status were escaping from rural poverty into the abandoned urban neighborhoods that soon became ghettos of despair. In addition, there was a surging technology of communication that for the most part sent messages one way—from the affluent society to the poor—raising expectations which high-rise public housing and mounting unemployment did nothing to satisfy.

A lot of Americans began inventing their way out of this impasse. Some students and preachers started a movement for civil rights, the most basic kind of citizen participation. A few mayors and foundations tried to head off urban violence by forming new majorities in public decision-making. A gaggle of journalists and authors began turning the communications flow the other way—from the poor to the affluent society. A President, re-awakened by the specter of Appalachian poverty, directed his government to develop a plan to fight poverty.

With incredible speed, a vast outpouring of diverse energies and motivations funnelled into a swirling set of open-ended phrases and programs: “community action,” “maximum feasible participation,” “a war against





poverty." That quickly rigged system of floodways was bound to be inundated by a volume of ambivalent feelings. Social critics attributed these shortcomings to the "misconceived idea of citizen participation." They claimed the effort really represented nothing more than the machinations of professional reformers with a romantic quest for community in a disillusioned world.

A Mississippi welfare mother disagreed. A Wolfe County, Kentucky mountaineer disagreed. The only justification for a poverty war, in his eyes, was "to do what needs doing," and not just what the poverty warriors wanted. The drafters of the War on Poverty legislation disagreed. The turbulence was inevitable because of demographics, because of the centralization of society, because of dreams too often deferred.

The drafters were receptive to the idea of citizen participation because they had seen it work in a Department of Justice juvenile delinquency pilot program, and because they realized as well as anyone that handouts, programs from above, and bureaucratic paternalism only perpetuated dependency. Citizen participation was not a new idea. It was one freighted with the democratic rhetoric of the Founding Fathers, and one which social workers had been trying for years.

The Will of the People

The mobilization of a democracy's full resources toward a social goal, such as the alleviation of poverty, depends upon the will of the people involved. Citizen participation then becomes a source of productivity and labor not otherwise tapped. On a Navajo reser-



vation in Arizona, fire had leveled a building which had housed a Head Start program run by the community for its children. Within hours, a community meeting had been convened and a decision made to convert the chapter house into a temporary facility as a volunteer effort on a crash basis. Twenty-four hours later, the chapter house was a usable facility, and the program was maintained without disruption.

Citizen participation serves as a source of knowledge and expertise—both corrective and creative. It becomes a means of securing feedback on policy and programs, of making institutions more responsive, and of developing inventive and innovative approaches. Take, for example, the “beans and roof problem,” explained by a migrant farmworker in Washington’s Yakima Valley. “Usually a family gets here in the middle of the day, often with no money for food or shelter. They have no way of knowing where to go to get work, so they have to wait till next morning to go to the employment office. But the employment office don’t open till 8:30, and farmers do their hiring by sunup. So they usually can’t get on a list until the afternoon, and then it’s for work the next day, which means they can’t make any money until almost two days after they get here. So we decided to set up our own program. We got some money from the government and set up an employment center, which is mostly a telephone and bulletin board. Then we asked all the farmers to call us as soon as they knew how many pickers they need. Now, when a man comes in with his family, we can be pretty sure of getting them to work first thing in the morning.”





In one sense, citizen participation is an end in itself—an affirmation of democracy. Edgar Cahn wrote that “our national wealth was founded on land from the Indian. Our industrial wealth from coal, iron and steel, was cast at the cost of human life in the scarred mountains of Appalachia. Our cotton and textile industry was spun from black slavery. Our overwhelming agricultural yield is annually produced with the peonage of migrant workers. This land belongs to us all. If one must live in poverty, then participation as an assertion of citizenship, and an expression of dignity, may well be

the only way to claim a portion of that national heritage.”

There is an even greater, more far-reaching value to citizen participation, best expressed by cultural historian Christopher Lasch. He wrote, “In order to break the existing pattern of dependence and put an end to the erosion of competence, citizens will have to take the solution of their own problems into their own hands. They will have to create their own ‘communities of competence.’” Poor people have the most to gain from the creation of competent communities, since they are most directly affected

by what Lasch described as the “new paternalism” of a managerial and bureaucratic elite.

Building “competent communities,” breaking the bonds of dependency, creating self-reliance are the heart of VISTA’s mission. More and more VISTA volunteers themselves are low-income natives of the communities they serve. On the community level, volunteers have as their goal institution building, putting together ongoing community-run programs and organizations ranging from crafts and food cooperatives to home renovation crews. Not only do these institutions develop poor people’s capacities for leadership and problem solving, but they also deal directly with the material problems facing the poor, such as lack of income and buying power, low levels of skills, inadequate housing. Most important of all, poor people themselves determine the needs to be met and the methods to be used by these institutions.

The War on Poverty created job-training programs, pre-school education classes, community action agencies, and many other structures—all of which offer some provision for citizen participation. But VISTA represents the fullest expression of the federal government’s commitment to fighting poverty with a citizen participation strategy. From the poor Americans who work in their own neighborhoods as VISTA volunteers, to the nationally recruited volunteers who mobilize resources and catalyze citizen involvement, all the way up the scale to the locally run organizations that keep on working after the volunteers have finished their terms of service, VISTA has one meaning: “Together, we can do it ourselves.”



VISTA: A Vision of Social Change for the Future

by Mary E. King, ACTION Deputy Director

VISTA was born out of the urgency of social justice movements of the 1960s, but few fully realize VISTA's role and obligation for the 1980s.

In the civil rights movement of the early 1960s, our hope was to spark grassroots political participation and community organizing across the South. We were young activists with the dream of parlaying organizing and direct action into popular democratic involvement for poor blacks, even where violent retaliation against the movement would be harshest. At that time, one of the major criticisms of our liberation effort was that it produced false expectations rather than the permanent machinery necessary to change what needed to be changed.

Some critics may have been correct then, but they were not farsighted. They did not consider what new paths the civil rights, peace and women's movements would eventually lead to, or the leaders they would produce.

Nor did they envision the rapidity with which our challenge would be-

come the prevalent analysis of social need. One of our beliefs was that government had a greater responsibility than it had shown before to those who were in greatest need. This took currency faster than we dared hope in those days.

Our "radical" ideals did not change: the mainstream changed. Today, the civil rights movement's definitions of social need have become an underlying principle of both government and traditional social services.

That movement added a new dimension—advocacy—to the old theme of community action, making an already rich tradition of voluntary action richer. And, in offering a new perception of what young people could accomplish as organizers, the movement propelled the creation of VISTA.

The idea of a government-supported national program enlisting volunteers for peaceful social change is compelling. It is even more compelling

with its message of self-help for the 1980s.

America in the 1980s will be challenged by energy shortages and worldwide economic upheaval. New problems need new solutions to meet the continuing needs of people for food, shelter and energy.

VISTA is on the front lines of this search in addressing human need through voluntary social change, based on an ethic that individuals can produce institutional change. VISTA volunteers seek to create models for change, to help others help themselves. In working through demonstration and advocacy, by translating law into ordinary language, and by simple strategies for small scale self-help answers to local problems, VISTA volunteers create what one sociologist called, "images of the future." Their means are old-fashioned—human energy and idealism—but will be as necessary for the future as they were in the past. VISTA is the articulation of a possibility.

VISTA has reached a milestone many never believed possible—15 years of service to our nation. In celebration of this accomplishment it is an honor and a privilege for me to extend my personal congratulations for 15 years of dedication to the needs of those less fortunate than many.

Where there has been a void to be filled, VISTA has been there. VISTA volunteers are famous for their motivation, their flexibility and their inventiveness. I would also add dedication, responsiveness and compassion. VISTA is her volunteers, they are her success.

To those 4,000 volunteers serving today, the 70,000 who have served in the past, and the thousands more who will serve VISTA in years to come, I applaud your efforts. You have made us proud.

*Honorable Edward W. Brooke
Chairperson of the National Low Income Housing Coalition,
former U.S. Senator (R-MA)*



A Journey Begins

1962. A young, idealistic President grapples with crises in Cuba, Berlin, and the Congo. At home, racial tension spills over into violent confrontation, dividing communities across the country. In the South, civil rights activists are routinely harrassed, beaten, and jailed. But the problems are not regional. While Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy initiates major efforts to eliminate discrimination in federal jobs and housing and to enforce school desegregation, the federal government launches desegregation lawsuits in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and dozens of other cities.

Within this tumultuous atmosphere the idea for a "domestic Peace Corps" was born. Among the challenges—a unique mission to create not just another government program, but a mechanism through which the poor and disadvantaged could better help themselves.

Dick Boone, then a member of the Attorney General's staff on juvenile delinquency projects recalls, "We were working with adolescent street gangs at the time, under a Justice Department program, and found that professionally trained personnel were *least* likely to work effectively in the ghetto."

Later, when Mr. Boone joined the first study group on the feasibility of national service, he would share that idea with others: Shouldn't a domestic Peace Corps be more than just another well meaning federal intervention program?

The First Study Group

During the summer of 1962, David Hackett, director of juvenile delinquency efforts at the Justice Depart-

