

SPIRIT

The Magazine of Volunteers of America® • Fall 2004



*IN THIS ISSUE: People with developmental disabilities lead lives of independence
Frances Hesselbein on leadership • Volunteers spend vacation helping children in Belize
Louisville's continuum of services saves families*



SPIRIT

Volunteers of America—There are no limits to caring.®



MEET VIRGINIA

With the right support, people with developmental disabilities can thrive in their communities. After 77 years institutionalized, “Miss Virginia” Hinson found a new lease on life with music, cats and Harleys in a group home in Nashville through help from caretakers like Vicky Rager.

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

A Commitment to Affordable Housing



Charles W. Gould, National President of Volunteers of America

Since the early 1980s, the United States has found itself in a housing crisis. Rising land prices and property taxes, gentrification and increasing homelessness have added to the complex problem of providing low-income families with a safe and appropriately priced place to live. The lack of such housing is a significant hardship for low-income households—preventing them from affording other basic necessities such as food and clothing, transportation and medical care.

As one of the largest nonprofit providers of quality affordable housing, Volunteers of America is committed to providing low-income families, seniors and individuals with disabilities with a comfortable and low-cost place to live. Nationally, Volunteers of America owns and operates more than 200 affordable housing communities in 31 states that are home to more than 20,000 people.

Volunteers of America looks beyond the financing and acquisition of a property, and addresses the social problems of residents to help them overcome the obstacles of poverty and improve their lives. Our housing communities include supportive services that enhance the quality of life of residents, such as family literacy classes and English as a second language. From transitional housing for the homeless and former offenders to permanent housing for low-income families, seniors and individuals with disabilities, Volunteers of America is working hard to address a very real need for affordable housing in our communities.

Among the stories in this issue of *SPIRIT*, you will find an article about one of our successful housing programs, the continuum of services in Louisville, Ky., along with the story of how Volunteers of America is working to provide people with developmental disabilities the housing and support that make it possible for them to live with independence and dignity.

Please join us in our efforts to provide our country's most vulnerable citizens with a decent and affordable place to live.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charles W. Gould". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Charles W. Gould
National President

IN BRIEF

Tribute Dinner Focuses on Military and Partnerships



Gen. Eric K. Shinseki, retired U.S. Army Chief of Staff, accepts the Volunteers of America Ballington and Maud Booth Award for leadership and philanthropy.

With the Volunteers of America national conference set in Philadelphia, the cradle of liberty, this year's Tribute Dinner honored our nation's military. Gen. Eric K. Shinseki, retired U.S. Army Chief of Staff, received the Volunteers of America Ballington and Maud Booth Award given for leadership and philanthropy that reflect the values underlying Volunteers of America's mission and the Booths' spirit of commitment to human betterment.

In accepting the award from National Board Chairman Frances Hesselbein, Shinseki said that soldiers serving overseas discover that volunteering is a less common practice than in the U.S. They could learn about taking responsibility for themselves from Volunteers of America.

"I accept this award for all soldiers and their families," he said.

One of Volunteers of America's closest and most meaningful partners, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, was given Volunteers of America's Good Samaritan Award in Philanthropy for spearheading initiatives that have heightened and expanded the level of services Volunteers of America provides. Casey Foundation Vice President for Service and System Reform Patrick McCarthy discussed the foundation's commitment to ensuring that all people they touch are "valued, supported and included as contributors to this society as a whole."

Volunteers of America gave its Good Samaritan Award in Service, for those who exemplify Volunteers

of America's mission of volunteerism, to Dennis and Patti Frist. Their son Luke was killed in Iraq last January, yet the Frists continued to serve soldiers' families through the 209th Quartermaster Family Readiness Group, work they began when Luke was first called to duty. In addition to helping men and women prepare for their service overseas and being separated from their families, they helped those back home with necessary paperwork and other needs—sharing their commitment to giving of themselves despite their grief.

"Even with the loss of Luke, we could not leave those people who meant so much to us," said Patti Frist, who accepted the award on behalf of the entire 209th Quartermaster Family Readiness Group.

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IN BRIEF

Casey Foundation Rewards Family Programs

In its third year, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's partnership with Volunteers of America continues to strengthen families nationwide. To promulgate the foundation's concept that "Kids do well when families do well, and families do better when they live in a supportive environment," Volunteers of America's 2004 winners are recognized for programs that serve families as a whole unit—not as individual children, parents or grandparents—and create supportive environments for families and children to overcome difficult times and succeed.

"The Casey Foundation is dedicated to helping children, and we believe that one critical way to do that is to support programs that support families," says Miriam Shark, Casey Foundation Senior Associate in Planning, Research and Development.

Presented with \$20,000 awards at the Volunteers of America national conference in Philadelphia, recipients included Volunteers of America of Greater New York for its

HIV/AIDS Family Support Services, including respite care, case management and counseling, and free legal assistance; and Volunteers of America of Western Washington for Words Travel Family Connections, a literacy program that

and GED classes to homeless families with a mother under 24 years of age. Exemplifying the Casey Foundation's family strengthening concept, Volunteers of America of Colorado houses families entering the

staff from across the country to learn from their success. Thanks to the grant, 25 participants will be able to travel to the sites to learn from the winners' expertise directly, enabling best-practice training to reach small and large offices alike. The training will focus on family strengthening elements of the programs,

which participants can implement either in their own existing programs or as springboards for new programs.

"Over the last three years, I've watched the relationship between the Casey Foundation and Volunteers of America grow and blossom," says Shark. "Together we are making a difference in the lives of children around the country."

To learn more about Volunteers of America's family strengthening programs, see "Bedknobs and Bluegrass" on page 19, which focuses on one of last year's award winners, Louisville's continuum of services, which leads people from homelessness to stability in housing.


connects children with their incarcerated parents through visits, taped readings and assigning a family advocate.

Volunteers of America of Colorado received a grant for its continuum of services: emergency shelter, counseling and case management, transitional housing, children's services

emergency shelter as a unit in their own rooms, not split up by gender or age, as in many facilities. Keeping the family together fosters the children's feeling of security and normality in an abnormal situation.

This fall, the award-winning programs will hold training sessions for Volunteers of America





Rebecca Odom and her caretaker Pat Bell enjoy daily outings. With the right preparation, Bell is hopeful that one day Odom could be a greeter at her favorite store, Wal-Mart.

“We’re People First.”

BY MARDY FONES 🍎 PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINA A. FREITAG

“The truth is, able-bodied and disabled people have more in common than appears on the surface. Fundamentally, we all have the same needs.”

— Volunteers of America of Texas Program Director Tony Forshage

“The Constitution says everyone is entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It doesn’t say you’re entitled unless you’re disabled.”

Jeff Ridgeway, president of the Alabama chapter of People First, a nationwide advocacy organization for people with learning difficulties

“Miss Virginia” Hinson and her caretaker Vicky Rager visit one of Miss Virginia’s favorite haunts, the local Harley-Davidson dealership.



If Virginia Hinson could, she’d hop on a Harley-Davidson every day and ride off into the sunset. At 91, “Miss Virginia” firmly believes that neither age nor disability is a barrier to squeezing every moment of joy from life.

Until five years ago, Miss Virginia lived in a 2,000-resident, state-operated institution in Tennessee. When her family placed her there 77 years ago, people with mental retardation and developmental disabilities were shunned, hidden from view. It was the accepted best practice of the time. She was safe there, her basic needs were met. But life was regimented and Spartan. Even basic personal choices—what to wear and eat and do—were nonexistent.

Today, Miss Virginia lives with two others in one of 25 group homes in Tennessee operated by Volunteers of America for people

with mental retardation or who have developmental disabilities. Nestled in an established neighborhood, Miss Virginia’s home has a porch and shady yard and its interior is comfortable and cozy. Each resident has a private bedroom to display favorite belongings. They share family meals, watch television and have lives based on who they are, not on someone else’s schedule. Miss Virginia, who is mentally retarded and confined to a wheelchair, enjoys listening to music—gospel and children’s songs are her favorites—and petting the cats her caretakers helped her adopt.

“Expectations have changed, and there’s a recognition and redefinition of potential,” says Volunteers of America Director of Program Development Angela King. “Society has become more respectful of individual differences, and that includes people with disabilities.” This change of attitude, she says, enables people with developmental disabilities more freedom of choice in their lives.

“Helping the most vulnerable and under-served reach their full potential” is a key element of Volunteers of America’s mission so when states began closing their large institutions for people with developmental disabilities in the 1990s, local Volunteers of America offices stepped up to the plate. Their goal? To partner with states to create innovative, community-based living settings where residents have real opportunities to become an integral part of community life.

The commitment is as vast as it is rewarding, says June Koegel, president and CEO of Volunteers of America in Northern New England. “We’re known as an agency that works with people no

one else wants to work with,” meaning people who require intensive, individualized support—which, in turn, requires extensive resources and creativity. “We’re willing to try new methods, look at hard issues,” she says. Volunteers of America has established group homes with a handful of residents who receive 24-hour care and support. Staff members also deliver care in the family homes.



With the right support, the transformation can be incredible. Avid Wal-Mart customer Rebecca Odom smiles and talks to everyone she sees—amazing for the mentally retarded, wheelchair-confined woman who was afraid even to ride in the home’s van when she first arrived four years ago. “I would love to see Rebecca working part-time as a greeter at Wal-Mart,” says her assistant Pat Bell, whose friendship with Odom includes frequent visits on her days off. Their outings include going to a nearby cosmetology school to have Odom’s hair done by students who have befriended her. “I’ve been practicing with her, helping her learn to say, ‘Welcome to Wal-Mart,’” says Bell. “It would be such a big boost to her ego to have a job.”



Born with multiple disabilities, Angela Reid, 27, was always cared for by her parents in suburban Dallas-Fort Worth. “She’s deaf and non-ambulatory. She has limited vision, she’s non-verbal and incontinent,” says her mother Donna Gotcher. “She’s essentially a baby. I don’t think a night has gone by in the last 27 years when she hasn’t crawled into my lap to be rocked.”



Volunteers of America staff take Reid shopping, horseback riding and swimming, and respite care has provided family breaks for an afternoon ballgame or vacation.

Jimmy Long, 72, who suffered a disabling stroke 25 years ago, has an active life in Nashville. Playing pool at the local senior center is one of his favorite activities. His assistant, Donna Rice, gladly chalks his cue.

OUR LONGEST COMMITMENT

Supporting people with developmental disabilities is the longest-term residential support Volunteers of America offers, and the need is growing. With large state and county institutions closing, families preferring care in communities, and aging parents unable to care for their adult children, many more people with developmental disabilities will need help as time passes.

This awesome responsibility is one Volunteers of America accepts with eagerness and humility as our programs expand into new states each year. “Thirty years from now, we’re going to be retired or maybe deceased, but there will be folks living in Indiana, Maine, in the 14 states we’re serving today, who for 30 years have had daily support from Volunteers of America. We are making a commitment to people who are going to be dependent on us for 30 or 40 years or more,” says Director of Program Development Angela King.

“Some of these people do not have families so every celebration of their life—every birthday party, every Christmas present—will be our responsibility. Every drink of water that some of these folks receive is our responsibility.

“This is the essence of our mission.”

“How we respond to these folks is an indication of who we are and what we value and what we believe. They are a part of what makes community. Life has value intrinsically. When we stop believing that, it lessens who we are as people.”

Volunteers of America Director of Program Development Angela King

In Seattle, Kent McDaniel works at Starbucks and has an active role in determining his care and living situation.



This in-home care has allowed Gotcher to work, first as a certified nurse's aide and now as a law firm paralegal and office manager.

But Volunteers of America steps back when the family steps in. “Caring for Angela for 27 years is like having another person attached to your hip. It's a big responsibility,” says Gotcher. “Volunteers of America has helped us find balance.”

“People with developmental disabilities have been dealt a difficult deck of cards,” says Koegel. “Still, it's critical that they be able to live in homes, not institutions. There's so much talk now about clinical outcomes and results. But for some people, existing day-to-day without struggling is an achievement.”



“I'm pretty good at getting what I want,” says 27-year old Kent McDaniel, who has cerebral palsy and works full-time in customer service for Seattle coffee icon, Starbucks. When the care he was receiving through another provider

wasn't meeting his needs, McDaniel looked to Volunteers of America in Western Washington, whose philosophy of self-determination gives people with developmental disabilities an active role in selecting their caregivers and creating living situations.

McDaniel works closely with local staff regarding his own care and providers. “I'm pretty much self-contained,” says McDaniel, who lives with two roommates. “Even so, I have caregivers around the clock and at home. Things have gone well for me through Volunteers of America. They take care of me and care about me and my success.” Caregivers assist him with personal care, budgeting, shopping and other tasks.



Nearly 35 years ago, Margaret and Francis H. Lori, Sr. sent their profoundly retarded son Frankie, to the Muscatatuck State Developmental Center in Butlerville, Ind. “I was 41 and had a new baby. Frankie was getting disorderly and rough,” says Margaret Lori. “Our pastor encouraged us to place him there. It was the hardest thing we ever did.”

But when Muscatatuck's closure was announced, the Loris worried Frankie wouldn't adjust. Early this year, they met their local Volunteers of America program director at church and saw the possibility of a better life for Frankie in Volunteers of America's Clarksville, Ind., group home.

“He's doing just wonderfully,” says Margaret, 84. “He gets up every day and makes his bed. He vacuums his room and takes his dishes from the table to the sink. The staff has taught him manners and he behaves so well.” Frankie's

outings have even included visiting the Loris' home for the first time since he left for Muscatatuck. "He's growing and developing and changing and that's exciting," says Margaret. "It's like a dream come true."



Benjamin Miller, Rodney Sanchez and Chris Gantt, who have mental retardation, and are legally blind and deaf, are residents of Volunteers of America homes near Austin, Texas. They live their dreams in weekly training sessions preparing for the Special Olympics swimming competition. "When they're at the pool, they meet and work with people from the community," says Volunteers of America of Texas Program Director Tony Forshage. "The normal kids see disabled people doing normal things. It engenders a kind of camaraderie and provides a context for discovery.

"Swimming is something they discuss and celebrate, and a way of redefining who they are," he explains. "Suddenly, they're not just dual sensory-impaired people. They can honestly say, 'I'm a champion swimmer. I'm not just a client in a group home, I'm an athlete.'"



Jeff Ridgeway is president of the Alabama chapter of People First, a nationwide advocacy organization for people with learning difficulties. Ridgeway, 39, who has hearing and vision deficits and lost use of one side of his body due to a stroke, works part-time at a Bruno's grocery store in Mobile. He lives independently and counts



on Volunteers of America for help with transportation, shopping and paying bills. "From Volunteers of America and People First, I found out I had rights and choices and options and that I could be more than a farmer's son," says Ridgeway, who has helped create People First chapters throughout Alabama, ensuring that people with disabilities and their families learn about their rights and resources.

"It boils down to this," he says. "We're people first, and people with disabilities second. We want to be paid decently, to have good housing and live like everyone else. People with disabilities want their piece of the pie. We may need someone to help us hold the fork while we eat it, but we want it and we're entitled to it."



Mardy Fones is a Nashville-based freelance writer who specializes in human interest stories.



Chris Gantt, Benjamin Miller and Rodney Sanchez, all of whom have mental retardation and are legally blind and deaf, train weekly near Austin, Texas, for the Special Olympics swimming events.

Leading The Way

*National Board Chairman
Discusses Volunteers of
America's Leadership Role*

By Sally Ruth Bourrie

Photography by Roger Smith

When I met with
Volunteers of
America's Chairman
of the National Board

Frances Hesselbein, her warm welcome included a cup of tea—which she prepared herself. I immediately thought of the words for which she is renowned: “Leadership is a matter of how to be.”

Undisputedly one of the world's experts in nonprofit leadership, Hesselbein comes by her knowledge through decades of experience, beginning as a Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. volunteer, and later as its chief executive officer from 1976 to 1990. Under her leadership, during a tumultuous era in which women were renegotiating their place in society, the Girl Scouts grew to more than 3 million, tripling minority membership. The organization reinvented itself to prepare young women for roles in the modern world while sustaining its traditional mission of shaping character. After retiring from the Girl Scouts, Hesselbein was a co-founder of the Leader to Leader Institute (formerly the Peter F.



Volunteers of America National Board Chairman Frances Hesselbein is a world-renowned expert on leadership in the nonprofit sector.

Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management) and remains chairman of its Board of Governors. In 1998, she received the United States' highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

To prepare for this interview, the author of *Hesselbein on Leadership* recommended I read *Good to Great*, Jim Collins' study of companies that transform themselves. As Hesselbein poured tea, one of Collins' key findings came to mind: that leaders of “great” companies

share two qualities: humility and strong will.

Another attribute of great leaders, writes Collins, is their tremendous ambition—not for themselves but for their organizations. We began there.

Q: What is your ambition for Volunteers of America?

FH: I believe Volunteers of America can play an amazing leadership role, not just in the social sector but also in society, leading

society in even greater commitment, compassion and caring. I'm tremendously passionate about our mission.

That's why I chose to serve as board chairman. I don't think one can be effective unless we are deeply committed to the mission and the values of the organization. And second, the quality and character of the leadership, both volunteer and staff. Volunteers of America seemed to be at a point in its history where it could move forward to be far more effective than ever before, and it seemed to be open to change. So I decided I would accept the invitation to serve a one-year term.

Q: That was two years ago, and you're still here—in fact, you just agreed to another two-year term.

FH: Yes. I feel very positive about the bright future of Volunteers of America. I feel such urgency about the world. The needs of children, families, older Americans, the homeless, the hungry, the needs of the most vulnerable escalate more rapidly every day. And governments at every level are sloughing off the support they once provided. Needs are escalating, resources are diminishing. A recent study by Northeastern University in Boston found 5.5 million young people ages 16 to 24, homeless, hopeless, jobless, walking the streets of our cities. This is intolerable.

People are waiting for us. Volunteers of America has a unique and compelling call to action, our call since day one: whenever there are people in need for whatever reason, we reach them and we serve them. Today the call is more insistent and we have to respond.

Q: How do we best respond?

FH: We must lead from the front, not push from the rear. We are in an historical period of massive change, and we must understand how this change will affect Volunteers of America and the people we serve, as we lead into the future.

In the past two years, Volunteers of America has begun this process in earnest. Those in the field and those at headquarters working together in what I call our circle of inclusion. We are building one great movement, with one great leadership team mobilized around a powerful common mission, common vision, common language, common values, common ground.

The next two years will be critical. Together, we have to care enough about the people we serve to challenge “the gospel of the status quo” and to make the changes necessary—never changing the principles, never the beliefs, never the mission, the soul of the organization, but we must find the courage to challenge every practice, policy, assumption and ask, “Will this help us be viable and relevant in the future?” If not, we file it gently away.

We must build upon the strengths of our past, too, for it gives us remarkable energy and the courage to lead from the front. It's as though everything we've ever done has prepared us for this moment.

Q: You have used the term “circle of inclusion” extensively. What does that mean?

FH: The days of organizational structure based on hierarchy are over, the old hierarchy developed in the 19th century, based on the



As we identify new customers we're not serving, one way we can meet burgeoning unmet needs is by recruiting a vast army of volunteers. Many of our services require professional staff, but many can be staffed by volunteers, others with a volunteer-staff partnership. But when it comes to reading to a child—and we know that reading to a child can play a critical role in that child's future as an adult—or painting a low-income elderly person's home, or delivering food to the infirm, volunteers make it possible for us to meet these growing needs. The Harvard School of Public Health-MetLife Foundation's recent study called *Reinventing Aging* found that Baby Boomers reaching late middle age offer an “unprecedented” opportunity for nonprofits: a large, skilled group with time and interest in service. If we are truly to reach and uplift all people, we must find ways to engage them in our movement.

Frances Hesselbein





I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the community, as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. Life is no “brief candle” for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for a short moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

George Bernard Shaw



Ten years from now when the history of Volunteers of America and its leaders is being written, may they write of you, “For a little while they held a ‘splendid torch,’” the future called, they responded, they kept the faith.

Frances Hesselbein



It is not business, it is not government, it is the social sector that may yet save the society.

Peter Drucker



structure of the Prussian Army. Today, there is no top or bottom, up or down; we move into an inclusive circle of commitment, relevance, viability, that embraces those we serve, those we serve with, those waiting to be served.

At the center of the circle, the leaders look across the organization and disperse some of their leadership tasks to a staff member who reports to them. What happens? That person immediately feels recognized and believes he or she can do this. Then she looks at tasks she can move across. Soon, you have this easy and energetic dispersal of the tasks of leadership. It is amazing how this circular structure and dispersed leadership unleash the creative spirits of your people.

Q: National President Chuck Gould has said that your gift to Volunteers of America has been your keen appreciation of the importance of remaining focused on mission—and that you communicate that in such an inspiring way. Why is clarity of mission so important?

FH: Mission is solely why we do what we do, our purpose, our reason for being.

Mission is the most powerful way to mobilize people; purpose, not paychecks, motivates people to serve in the social sector. A mission statement should be short, powerful, compelling. Peter Drucker says, “Mission should fit on a T-shirt.”

The bottom line of all social sector organizations is changing lives, addressing the needs of the spirit, mind and body. Mission is the key. Everything begins with mission. Everything flows from mission.

We focus on performance and results. Donors no longer reward

good intentions. Without profit as their bottom line, social sector organizations must find other ways to assess their effectiveness.

The mission should be revisited every two or three years, preceded by an environmental scan. The environment is changing so rapidly that we could be planning for a world that no longer exists, or for needs not the most critical. We use our environmental scan to identify the two or three trends—no more—that will have the greatest impact upon our work. Then we agree on their implications for the organization and its work. This is the foundation for determining strategy for the future, goals and objectives that will allow us to lead.

Q: I can’t let you go without addressing leadership specifically. What makes an effective leader?

FH: An effective leader is mission-focused, values-based, demographics-driven. Today, people are hungry for leadership. They watch the leader very carefully. People expect leaders to embody the values they talk about. Leaders live the values. When we expose our people at every level to the power of the mission, and the organization is values-based and the leaders embody those values, then the organization has leaders at every level who understand that in the end it is the quality and character of the leader that determines performance and results. Leadership is a matter of how to *be*, not how to *do*.

Volunteers of America has that kind of leadership right across the organization, and together we will unleash the energy of our leaders at every level, “to reach and uplift all people.”

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BENEFACTORS

Honoring History

❖
*We will now go down to
the noted Ash Hollow and
strike the Sweet River,
then will rest awhile.*

*Keturah Belknap,
Oregon Trail Pioneer*

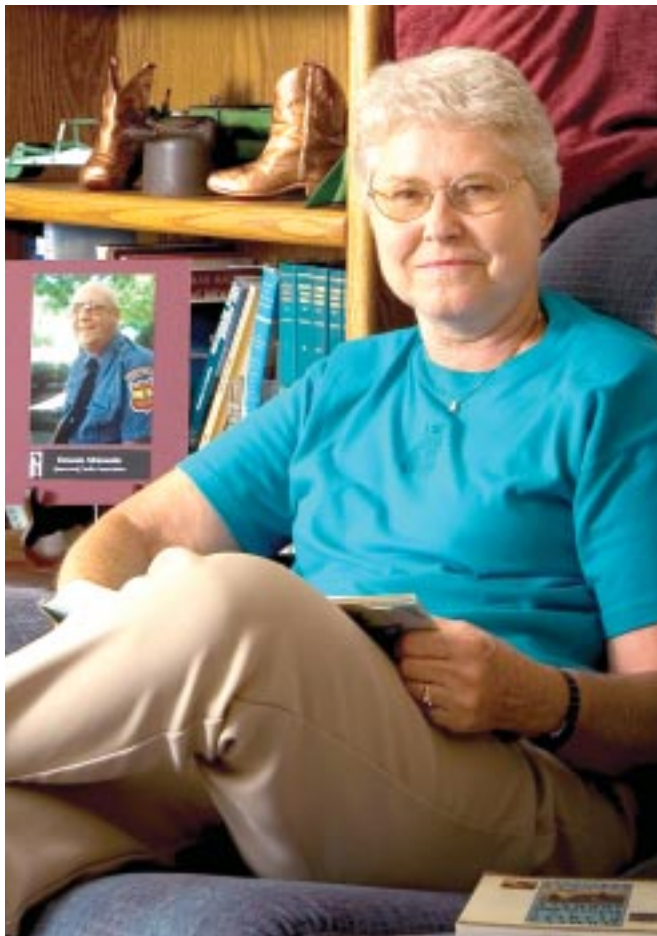
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Whether for time or funds, Volunteers of America of Western Nebraska can count on Rita Shimmin. Volunteers of America's workout room in Lewellen (population 300) was a regular stop for Rita and her husband, Dennis, who was superintendent of the state historical park in nearby Ash Hollow.

At first, Dennis was the more active in Volunteers of America, but Rita has taken up the slack since his death and her retirement from teaching in 1998. She served on its preschool board of directors—Garden County's only state-certified preschool—and recently joined the greater organization's board. In addition, "We both decided that a percentage of our estate would go to Volunteers of America in Lewellen. We feel that their programs are a great benefit to the community," says Shimmin.

With a handful of mostly part-time employees, Lewellen's office serves the Nebraska Panhandle's 90,000 residents. After years of drought, with government budget cuts eliminating resources while need escalates,

the office distributes thousands of Scholastic Books, runs a food pantry and a childcare center, provides emergency utility assistance, and coordinates school nurses and nurse home visitation for families with newborns.



Rita Shimmin of Ogallala, Neb., reads the pioneer diaries that bring the Ash Hollow Pageant to life each year. She and her husband, Dennis, have given generously of time and funds to Volunteers of America in Nebraska.

Volunteers of America makes a huge difference in this far-flung community. Besides health programs,

"We're by far the smallest Volunteers of America office, but we say we serve the largest percentage of

our population," President and CEO Jean Jensen laughs. "Contributions from individuals are absolutely critical."

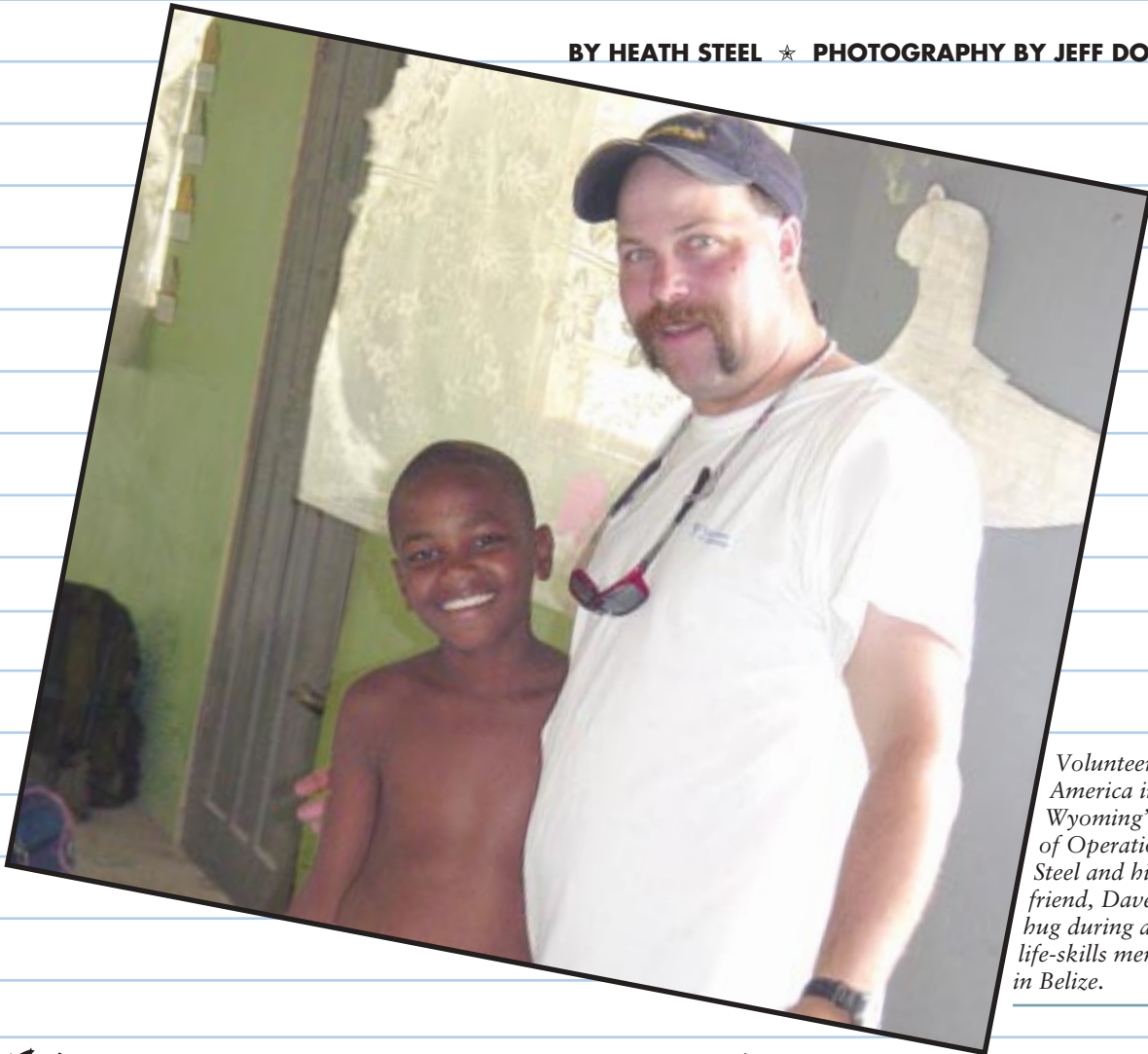
But the Ash Hollow Pageant remains closest to Shimmin's heart. For the Oregon Trail's 150th anniversary in 1993, Dennis Shimmin and Jensen decided to organize a pageant to tell Ash Hollow's story through pioneer diaries. The pageant is free, but the chuck wagon supper is a fund-raiser for Volunteers of America. Each June, 1,000 to 2,000 people attend the two performances on Ash Hollow's outdoor earth stage. Nearly 100 volunteers in period costume form the choir, band and acting troupe.

Shimmin helps research and write the script, choose the music, recruit volunteers—and keeps her colleagues moving forward. She loves to read the original diaries, which requires traveling to museums and libraries. "We always thought that we would end up repeating in the scripts, but then we find new material so we keep researching," says Shimmin. "This is a major piece of Nebraska history."

How I Spent My Summer Vacation

A DIARY FROM CAMP POSTCARD BELIZE

BY HEATH STEEL ★ PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF DOUGLAS

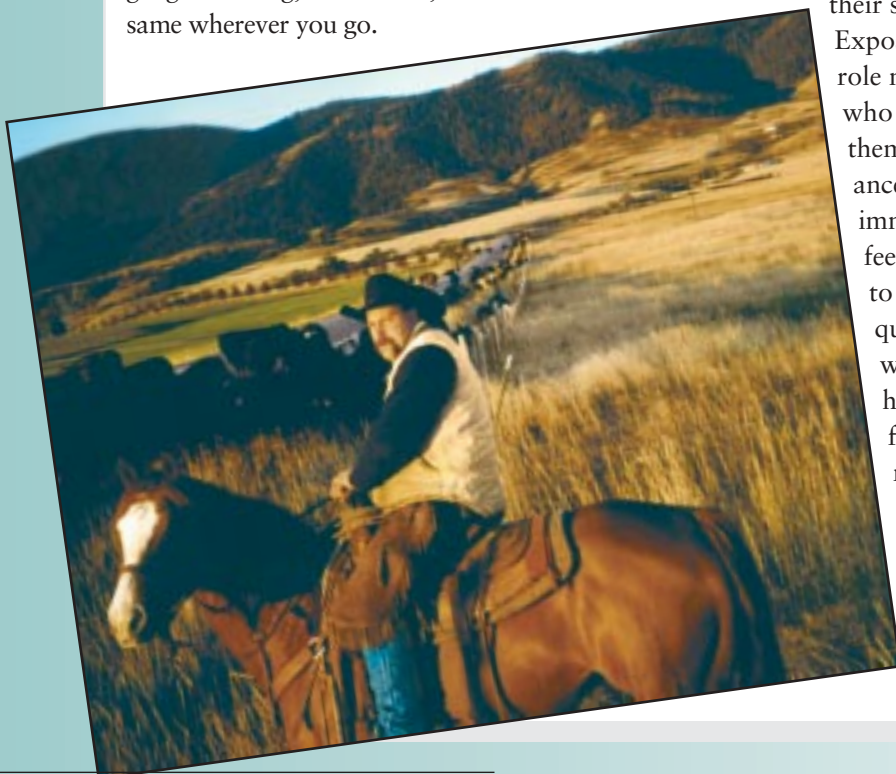


Volunteers of America in Wyoming's Director of Operations Heath Steel and his new friend, Dave, enjoy a hug during a week of life-skills mentoring in Belize.

This summer Volunteers of America's Camp POSTCARD program expanded from its birthplace in Maine to Wyoming and into the Central American country of Belize. Heath Steel, director of operations for Volunteers of America in Wyoming, helped organize and run Wyoming's first Camp POSTCARD in June and, with his wife Jennifer, was among the 27 United States volunteers and 21 Belizean volunteers who worked with fifth and sixth graders at Camp POSTCARD Belize (organized in partnership with the Anglican Diocese of Belize) for a week in early August.

For 11 years, Camp P.O.S.T.C.A.R.D. (Police Officers Striving To Create And Reinforce Dreams) in Maine has successfully brought at-risk fifth and sixth graders together with volunteer law-enforcement and criminal-justice professionals who, as camp leaders, interact in fun activities while mentoring young people in life skills that will help them reach a healthy, productive adulthood. Campers, who attend at no cost, share their thoughts, feelings and ideas, and learn the importance of self-respect and respect for others, teamwork and self-control. In Belize and Wyoming, Camp POSTCARD, as the replicated program is known, adapted to the local communities' needs while teaching the same values.

Steel kept a journal of his Belizean experience, which he generously shares with *SPIRIT* readers. That there are differences between Wyoming and Belize is no revelation, but, as Steel explains, the similarities are surprisingly many. And the language of caring, it turns out, is the same wherever you go.



Home on the Range

In addition to my full-time job with Volunteers of America in Wyoming, my wife and I run horses on our ranch. Our family basically lives outdoors. We hunt, fish—and my four-year-old daughter rides with me quite a bit. With 450,000 people in the entire state of Wyoming, we've got lots of space to enjoy the natural world.

Camp POSTCARD Wyoming

Camp POSTCARD Wyoming took place at Casper Mountain, where 72 fifth and sixth graders participated, along with 30 adult volunteers, including 22 law enforcement officers.

“Even in our Camp POSTCARD in Wyoming, kids knew what methamphetamine was and knew people who were using it. It was in their schools. Exposure to role models who give them guidance and immediate feedback to their questions while having fun made



Two young charges at Camp POSTCARD Wyoming smile for the camera.

“Short-term experiences like these leave lifetime impressions. The Kids in Belize saw others in the same straits, experienced people caring about them, and felt, ‘I have some value.’ That’s more important than any skill we might teach.”

Retired Minister Leo Ruffing, who also attended Volunteers of America fresh air camp during the Depression

our camp effective in giving kids a safe environment where they can explore important issues and learn skills and values that will serve them for life,” says Steel.

Heath Steel's natural habitat is the Wyoming outdoors.

Belize - Day One

Sunday morning. Everybody was up and ready to go early. With Belizean officers and teachers who welcomed us warmly, we set up computers, erected shelters and filled gift bags. We converted a schoolyard into an activity field complete with dining canopies and picnic tables, and filled classrooms with cots. By noon camp was ready.

After a second quick shower and change of shirts—a daily ritual to beat the heat—the nervousness set in. Jennifer and I wondered, “Do we have what it takes?” It’s one thing to raise your own kids, learning together, but we were about to meet six 12-year-olds from a different country,

“Thank you for all the things you did for us. God bless you always for all the food you got for us. You all did awesome!”

our group. We had just made up our minds to give it our best, when up pulled the bus. Day One had started.

We were greeted by three boys, Evan, Dave and Earwin. Dave, who was from Belize City, and Evan, who was from near Belize City, became fast friends. Earwin, who was from Monkey River Village, could have been from another world. The Monkey River originates at Richardson Peak, one of the highest mountains in Belize, and winds its way into the Gulf of Honduras. This largely undisturbed rainforest is home to about 200 people, who live at the river’s mouth. There are no roads to Monkey River, the only transportation is by sea, and it took Earwin two days to get to camp.

When he arrived, he was a little standoffish and it took a couple of days to gain his trust. He commented repeatedly about how much food was served. It hadn’t clicked into the rest of us about three meals a day being a lot of meals.

Although English is the native language, the kids spoke very fast with a kind of Creole twist and we were trying to play catch-up. The only ones with watches who were looking at them were the U.S. volunteers. Here, I discovered, things came more slowly, and that was ideal. It gave us time to get to know the kids. My good friend and

camp mentor Scott Kane, a burly sergeant from a sheriff’s department in Maine, got his fingernails painted by the girls in his group. That wouldn’t have happened anywhere but Belize.

What we would learn here is that these kids—our group were boys—live a healthy life. I don’t know of a single drug or alcohol discussion anyone had. Their issue is poverty.

Day Two - “Bigging-Up”

6:30 a.m. To our amazement the camp was quiet, the campers in their beds waiting for us. The difference between these kids and at home was

palpable. These kids took pride in everything they were given and kept track of it. After showers we gathered for prayer, then a breakfast of beans, cheese and bread.

That day, Aidan and Frederico joined us. They were both children of schoolteachers and they immediately bonded. Dave became the group leader



The camp took place in Corozal Town, on the scenic Corozal Bay in northern Belize.

and, as the “big city” kid, he educated the others on things like Sponge Bob.

We were amateurs when it came to 12-year-olds. Jennifer compared the task to herding yearling cattle, and she was correct. The kids loved arts and crafts, but the computer lab was the biggest draw, something that would not have been of interest in Wyoming or Maine where kids want to be outside. Belizean kids have a

real desire for technology and they got the most from this aspect of camp. Part of my goal in going to Belize was to shut off my cell phone, the computer and the fax. Jen and I had a family-style meal with the kids, sat down three times a day to talk about what we value. I don't know how many of these kids typically have a structured day, or if they ever need to tell somebody where they're going.

We learned new words. Our campers learned "recognition" and we learned "big-up." "We want to 'big-up' our leaders," they'd say—and I felt like they spent more time "big-upping" Jen and me—giving us recognition—in front of the whole group than we did them.

Day Three - Training Trust

Today Jen and I learned that we could enjoy pigtailed accompanied by beans and rice—I have never in my life seen a child clean a plate like that. I told my wife the only time I've ever seen a bone cleaned like that was on a carcass that a grizzly bear had gotten hold of.

Rodney came to the group. His father was at the camp and he was the principal of Rodney's school. Rodney was more standoffish, but it was a godsend because he and Earwin really stuck together. They were both fascinated by the technology and spent a lot of time in the computer lab. It was a challenge to bring the group together because they all had such different interests and you had six kids from completely different districts of the country who didn't know each other, but on the other hand, it surprised me how well the kids meshed with each other. I think that the kids kept each other comfortable and we worked to get them comfortable with us.

Our group was curious about our lives and our family's rural ranching ways, and they were very interested in Wyoming—as amazed by the snow as we were by the heat. But we discovered we have a lot of similarities, too. Wyoming is an agricultural, energy-based state, very rural, and these children came from rural environments. We talked livestock, and like us, a lot of our group had been exposed to horses. A few from our group came from agriculture-based families; their crop is sugar cane, ours is alfalfa. The difference was they harvested with fire and their hands; we use \$50,000-plus tractors.

Day Four - Mexico

Neither Jennifer nor I had ever felt more uncomfortable than we did with the responsibility that this trip over the border to Mexico placed on us, yet the day turned into one of the most rewarding and enlightening of our lives, with regards to interaction with the campers. Things we take for granted shocked our campers—going out to lunch, air-conditioning, hitting the mall and touring museums. For the first time I really felt our group trusting us as the campers looked to Jennifer and me for advice and expertise. They never left our side.

Day Five - Saying Good-Bye

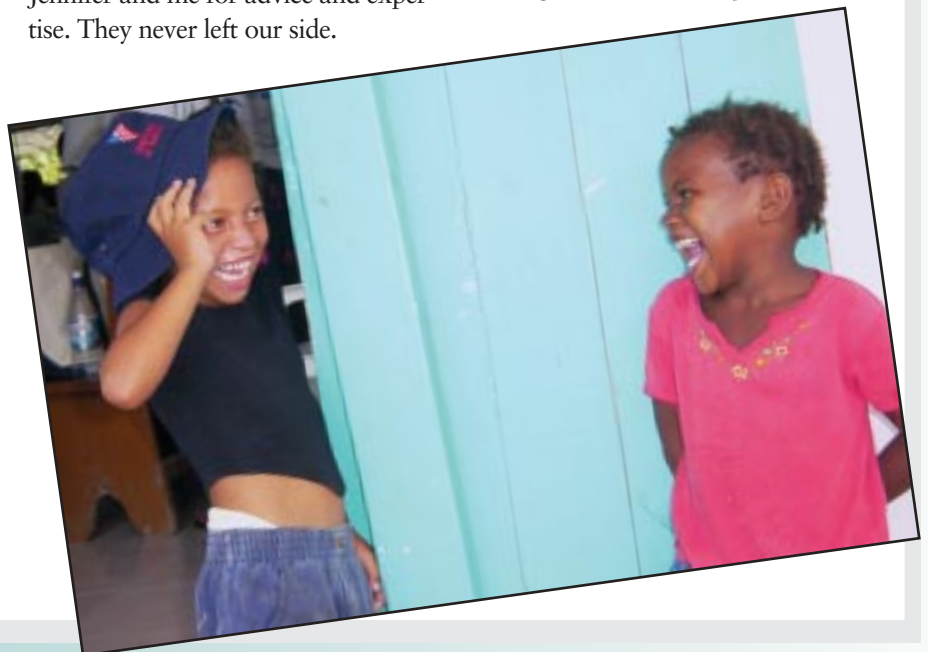
Mixed emotions. We were excited to head home and hug our own kids, but we knew that meant the end of camp.

The morning passed quickly. After tears and handshakes, the kids boarded the bus, and we were tearing down camp, much more slowly and quietly than we'd constructed it.

We were in Houston in less than two hours, away from a completely different world, where so little of what we take for granted is available. We'd go back again in a heartbeat—and if I don't have rice and beans for another six months, it'll be too soon, though I really miss the freshly squeezed watermelon juice.

Heath Steel is director of operations at Volunteers of America Wyoming and a third generation Wyoming rancher. He and his wife Jennifer volunteered with Camp POSTCARD Belize.

Shy children came out of their shells during their time at camp.



The program has been so successful—in nearly 20 years of operation an average of seven of 10 families entering the continuum of services return to stable, independent living—that last year it earned an Annie E. Casey Foundation Family Strengthening Award and served as a training site for Volunteers of America staff nationwide.

“The situations we come across are so compelling. These people are in such dire straits,” says Volunteers of America of Kentucky’s Director of Social Services Donna Trabue, who, like many of her colleagues, feels a commitment to homeless people that emanates from “faith and a sense of calling.”

Keeping a roof over one’s head can be precarious and once that home is gone, regaining that stability can be difficult. In Louisville,

nearly half those who were homeless last year were homeless at least once before during the previous three years, according to the Coalition for the Homeless, a national organization whose mission is to end homelessness.

“It’s all very fragile,” says Trabue.

Volunteers of America’s continuum of services includes case management, employment training and referrals, support groups, education and affordable housing counseling, life skills and financial management training, and on-site medical services, but ultimately the families must do the work. It’s up to them to learn skills to help them handle life’s ups and downs without falling into crisis. Program goals are clear: family self-sufficiency and ability to chart its own course, integrating into the community and accessing

Debbie and Keri Smith enjoy time together as they get settled in their home.





the Louisville Tenants Association, the Legal Aid Society, the Louisville Metro Housing Authority) with its Pyramid Award for Excellence in Collaboration, for lowering Louisville's evictions to the lowest rate in seven years.

The continuum of services has proved itself over the long haul. In 1993, Shawn and James Fugett stayed together at Volunteers of America's Family Emergency Shelter with their son Noel, who is severely disabled; today they are buying a home. "Our situation was difficult and made worse when we were separated before," says Shawn. "There was a sense at Volunteers of America that you weren't the only family with similar problems."

A former high school dropout, Shawn is now working toward a

college degree in psychology and serves on the staff of a Louisville's children's facility. Noel is a junior at DuPont Manual, one of Louisville's most prestigious public high schools.

"Those people at Volunteers of America were so helpful, very nice. They worked with us," says Shawn, who has devoted herself to inspiring others by sharing her family's story of success.

"Our commitment is to the entire family," says Volunteers of America Transitional Housing Manager Jayne Harbin. "We get so jazzed when we see a family succeed."



(Top) Case Manager Morris L. Delaney counsels Ebony Murphy and her baby in Volunteers of America's Eviction Prevention Program, which has saved many Louisville families from crisis.

(Below) Lisa Madden and her son, Alfonzo, at the Family Emergency Shelter.

AMERICAN ★ SPIRIT

UPWARD BOUND

// I have firsthand experience of Volunteers of America's mission of serving people," says Veronica Lara. "I am one of those who benefited from Volunteers of America's efforts in the community and it made a huge difference in my life."

In 1984 Veronica Lara was a 10th grader at Granada Hills High School who wanted to improve her math skills. She read in the school newspaper about the Upward Bound program operated by Volunteers of America for university-bound students who are the first generation in their families to enter college. "Inner-city schools don't provide enough guidance, such as which courses to take to make you more competitive for college admission and what exams are needed, like the SAT," says Lara whose parents are from Mexico. "My parents provided emotional and moral support, but they had no knowledge of what's involved in being admitted and prepared for a four-year institution."

Two Upward Bound summers spent on the campus of California Polytechnic State University being taught and supported by staff hired by Volunteers of America changed Lara from a girl with college dreams

to a university graduate of California State University, Northridge with a B.A. in sociology. Even more important, she says, is that she became a role model for her younger brothers, who have advanced degrees from Harvard, UCLA and Stanford.

The summers spent with Volunteers of America's staff stuck with her: "I saw the type of quality services Volunteers of America provided and the caring and inspiration they brought us." One year after graduation, Lara phoned Upward Bound's director, Myrna Joseph, and was hired as a Volunteers of America caseworker. In the years that followed, she advanced and eventually ran all children's services for Volunteers of America in Los Angeles.

In November, Lara will begin to oversee all divisions as vice president of operations. Bob Pratt, president and CEO of Volunteers of America in Los Angeles, says that Lara "has been a remarkably gifted manager and leader."



Volunteers of America is a national, nonprofit, spiritually based organization providing local human service programs and opportunities for individual and community involvement. Founded in 1896, Volunteers of America focuses on caring for the elderly and disabled and fostering their independence, promoting self-sufficiency for the homeless and for others overcoming personal crisis, and supporting troubled and at-risk children, with the goal of helping people become as self-reliant as possible.

Every year, nearly 1.8 million people feel the helping hand and compassion of Volunteers of America.

Volunteers of America is one of the nation's largest nonprofit providers of quality affordable housing for families, the elderly and people with disabilities, and is a major provider of skilled long-term nursing care and health services.

If you would like more information, please contact your local Volunteers of America organization, or call national headquarters at 1-800-899-0089 or visit www.VolunteersofAmerica.org.

