

SPIRIT

The Magazine of Volunteers of America® • Winter 2004



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SPIRIT

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



MAKING A NEW LIFE

Immigrants from Mexico and Central America eagerly await a day's work through a Volunteers of America day labor program. Fair wages, protection against exploitation and injury, and career assistance set this program apart.

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IN BRIEF

Cal Ripken, Major League Baseball Players Trust for Children Honored at Volunteers of America Tribute Event



Retired baseball player Cal Ripken plays cards with children at Volunteers of America's tribute event in Washington, D.C.

Though he made his mark in sports while playing for the Baltimore Orioles, Cal Ripken Jr., the "Iron Man," was honored recently for scoring in the game of life. Volunteers of America presented Ripken with the Ballington and Maud Booth Award in recognition of his charity efforts and positive force as a role model for young people.

Ripken was presented the award during the Volunteers of America event in Washington, D.C. The Booth award, established in 1954, honors those whose lives exemplify the spirit of humanitarian commitment, caring and compassion.

Volunteers of America also presented the Good Samaritan Award for Philanthropy to the Major League Baseball Players Trust for Children for its support of the Share with a Child partnership. More than 100 Major League baseball players have participated in Volunteers of America programs helping children and families.

The Good Samaritan Award for Service was presented to Volunteers of America's Words Travel program, which helps prison inmates improve their literacy as well as connect with their children by reading out loud to them via audio or videotape. Volunteers of America co-

sponsors the program with Scholastic Inc., the world's largest publisher of children's books.

Ripken is one of seven players in history with 400 home runs and 3,000 hits. In 1995, he broke Lou Gehrig's record for consecutive games played - 2,130 - and in 1998 ended his own streak with 2,632 games. Ripken retired from baseball in 2001 after 21 seasons with the Baltimore Orioles. His philosophy of hard work, dedication and good sportsmanship earned him Major League Baseball's Bart Giamatti Caring Award and the Roberto Clemente Award.

IN BRIEF

Grant Will Expand Retiree Volunteer Program

Volunteers of America's National Retiree Volunteer Coalition (NRVC) has received a \$1.29 million grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies to help assess opportunities for a pilot program to help develop corporate retiree programs in disadvantaged communities.

Project partners with Volunteers of America are the Center for Corporate

Citizenship at Boston College and the University of Maryland's Center on Aging, which will assist NRVC in developing new volunteer training programs over the three-year grant period.

Since 1977, NRVC has engaged thousands of retired workers from 65 corporations, government and nonprofit institutions to help people in need in more than 100 communities nationwide.

The Atlantic Philanthropies are an international group of foundations dedicated to "bringing about lasting changes that will improve the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable people."

The philanthropies were established in 1982 by Charles F. Feeney, co-founder of Duty Free Shoppers Group.

◆
Since 1977, NRVC has engaged thousands of retirees as volunteers from 65 corporations, government and nonprofit institutions to help people in need in more than 100 communities nationwide.
◆

Major League Baseball Players Trust for Children Gives Grants to 11 Volunteers of America Programs

Eleven Volunteers of America youth programs were selected to receive grants of up to \$10,000 through a donation from the Major League Baseball Players Trust for Children. As part of its Share With a Child partnership with Volunteers of America, these latest grants from the trust go directly to programs that serve disadvantaged children.

The grants will help programs that provide day care and housing, reading



programs and books, playground equipment and even a new stove to provide hot meals for children living in poverty.

The programs are in Harrisburg, Pa.; Rochester, N.Y.; Portland, Ore.;

Columbus, Ohio; Jersey City, N.J.; Indianapolis, Ind.; San Bernardino, Calif.; New Orleans, La.; Lewellen, Neb.; Everett, Wash.; and Chula Vista, Calif.

"These generous grants from the Players Trust

make it possible for Volunteers of America youth programs to better serve at-risk and disadvantaged children in their community," said Charles Gould, president of Volunteers of America.

Through the Share With a Child partnership, baseball players volunteer their time, rally financial support for youth programs and help lead efforts to increase public awareness of the importance of helping kids in need.

The families of day laborers receive help and services at the Volunteers of America day labor hiring hall. Josephina Macias and her children Maria and Antonio participate in the program.



STEPPING Up THE LADDER

More than a hiring hall, Volunteers of America's day labor program is helping California workers and their families to strive for the American dream

By Barbara Joan Tiger Bass • Photography by Neil Michael

At 6:30 a.m., on a typically chilly and foggy bay area morning, more than 100 men have gathered in the parking lot of Volunteers of America's day labor program in Oakland, Calif. Dressed in work clothes, blue jeans and baseball caps, they are unusually quiet for such a large group.

Before long, cars and trucks begin pulling into the lot. A few of the men, hoping for a quick hire and willing often to accept less than minimum wage, deal directly with the drivers and then head off to tasks ranging from gardening or housekeeping to cleaning up a heavy construction site.

But most employers and day workers—primarily immigrants from Mexico and Central America—choose to take their business inside Volunteers of America's hiring hall, a large refurbished warehouse building adjacent to the parking lot.

There, both parties discuss the job to be done and sign written contracts that both guarantee fair wages, generally between \$10 to \$12 an hour, and offer protection against exploitation or injury.

In three years of operation, the program has registered more than 2,000 workers in the Oakland area and helped many former day laborers to “bootstrap” their way to self-sufficiency through full-time employment or small business ownership, according to John Bailey, president and CEO of Volunteers of America in Oakland.

“I am excited about the growth of our day labor program,” Bailey said. “When we started, I never imagined we would be helping so many in the Oakland community. Behind every worker is a family, and every day we find new ways to offer additional support to families. Our goal is to be a full-service resource center to people who are on the bottom of the economic



Day laborers gather at the hiring zone near the Volunteers of America hiring hall in Oakland, Calif.

ladder, to help them take the next steps up.”

“I’m happy to say the city shares this vision,” Bailey added.

Funded with \$180,000 in annual grants from the city of Oakland, the Volunteers of America center provides an alternative to for-profit labor pools where workers have often been victimized by unscrupulous contractors and employers.

“For years we struggled with trying to find a place that day laborers could call their own,” said Oakland City Council member Ignacio de la Fuente. “Volunteers of America stepped in with compassion and professionalism, and brought the community together to help day laborers and their families.”

Indeed, the center has become much more than a hiring hall.

Workers and their families can get assistance with food, clothing, health care, housing and job skills training. There are English language classes, held on Saturdays so that clients don’t miss a chance for work.

Legal aid is also available for immigration matters. Last year, more than half of those who came to the center looking for a day’s work also took advantage of these comprehensive services.

“We are able to serve this very vulnerable population by building partnerships with other community organizations,” explained Zakkiyyah Nazeeh, a division director for Volunteers of America.

For example, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul uses donated food to prepare a daily spread of sandwiches, hot coffee and soft drinks for clients waiting for work.

“Many men and women come here hungry. If they don’t find work, they don’t eat. It’s as simple as that,” Nazeeh said.

In another partnership with the Jobs Consortium and Laborers Union Local 67, unskilled workers can get certified in Occupational Safety & Health Administration-approved lead and asbestos abatement, opening up opportunities for extended work

placements and increased wages. More than 50 clients have earned certification so far.

Program director Emelia Otero sees grassroots organizing and community-building as a key part of the center’s mission. Before joining Volunteers of America, she had spent 10 years working in Oakland’s Latino community helping to promote micro-business enterprises like fruit stalls and pushcart taco vendors, and mounting the city’s annual Cinco de Mayo festivities.

As a young girl growing up in Tijuana, Mexico, Otero would sit on the steps of her parents’ grocery store and watch people crossing the border to the United States.

“I knew I was going to live here someday,” Otero said. “And I knew I was going to do something to help people. I love this country so much because I have had so many opportunities. This country has open arms for whatever you want to do, and Volunteers of

“Volunteers of America stepped in with compassion and professionalism, and brought the community together to help day laborers and their families.”



Day laborers receive a wide range of services at the Volunteers of America hiring hall. Cynthia Hernandez (left) of Volunteers of America talks about job opportunities with Memo Lopez, Juan Jimenez and Jose Rodriguez (right to left).



Ignacio De la Fuente, (left) president of the Oakland City Council, and John Bailey, president/CEO of Volunteers of America in Oakland, address issues and concerns of day laborers at the day labor hiring hall.

America gave me the platform to do more.”

Otero takes a deep personal interest in everyone who comes to the center seeking a better life.

To Cynthia Hernandez, a job developer at the center, Otero has been a role model and mentor.

On a recent morning, Hernandez was engaged in a nonstop series of multiple tasks in the busy office—answering phone calls, writing up contracts, counseling workers on their

rights and helping a young Latino man find the address of his work assignment on a map of Oakland.

Like Hernandez, she seems to have boundless energy and enthusiasm for her work and a natural empathy with those she serves.

Raised in Mexico, she first came to the center “like everybody else, looking to find a day’s work.”

Impressed by the program and staff, Hernandez began volunteering at the center under Otero’s

supervision. Four months later, the full-time job developer position opened up and Hernandez had found her “dream job” at last.

Now she shares her hope and optimism with other job seekers.

“I tell everyone this place is like their home,” Hernandez said with a warm smile. “When they ask what they can give back, I just say nothing right now. Just be happy we’re here today, and come back to help when you can.”

BENEFACTORS

Steadfast, True, Loving and Kind, Ruby Mead Left a Legacy of Caring

When Ruby Jerston Mead of Baton Rouge, La., died last July at age 92, her surviving relatives wrote in a tribute that she “will always be remembered as a lady of great character and resolve... faithful, steadfast, true, purposeful, loving and kind.”

Her kindness extended to those she had never met, including the children at Volunteers of America's Parker House, a residential therapy center for abused, neglected and abandoned children.

A widow with no children of her own, Mead drew up her will three years ago. She made a bequest of \$72,000 to Volunteers of America's children's services on the advice of her niece, Marion Simon, a social worker who is familiar with the Volunteer of America programs and is impressed by their quality.

“Ruby chose to give her entire estate to charity,” said Simon's husband, Jay, a Baton Rouge attorney

who prepared the will. “She wanted to make a big difference in people's lives and she made sure whatever wealth she had would go where it would do the most good.”

Mead's gift was unexpected, said Bud Snowden, Volunteers of America's

many people, sometimes in ways that we cannot know,” Snowden said.

They are also a reminder that giving through a will is the simplest and surest way to create a legacy of caring that will help people in need and help provide for the future of our community.

Knighen, national director of planned giving for Volunteers of America.

“Creating a will is not difficult or time-consuming. And having a will can bring peace of mind and satisfaction to today's living.”

“There is a great deal of satisfaction to choosing a program that helps the elderly, children or a homeless family, knowing that the money you give will help people in your community for many years to come,” Knighen said.

Donors who make a charitable gift to Volunteers of America in their wills or estate plans also join with others who have made planned gifts or gifts directed to endowment in the Ballington and Maud Booth Legacy Society.



Ruby Mead (center) with Marion Simon (right), Ruby's niece and Francine Landers.

vice president for development in Baton Rouge.

“Gifts like these remind us that our mission and work touch the lives of

“Everyone should have a will or estate plan of some kind, regardless of their age, health or financial status,” said Melodie

For a complimentary copy of “Gifts of a Lifetime,” Volunteers of America's guide to giving, please call the development office at 1-800-899-0089, ext. 5073.

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A *day* MAKES.



Every day, Volunteers of America provides more than 840 children the care and support they need in their critical early years of life. To learn more about how you can help in your local community, please call us at 1.800.899.0089 or visit VolunteersofAmerica.org.

FRIENDLY GENERATIONS

**Something grand is happening in
Fremont, Ohio, as kids
and seniors come together
in love and learning**

By Rhonda Sewell

Photography by Greg Horvath

Volunteers of America's Bethesda Care Center and Otis Elementary School had been next-door neighbors in Fremont, Ohio, since 1975. For most of that time, their relationship was friendly, if somewhat distant.

But four years ago, Bethesda's administrator Roger Wyman had a sidewalk built to connect the school and the care center. The new link was both concrete and symbolic, reflecting growing ties of love and friendship between the elderly residents at Bethesda and the children at Otis Elementary.

Now kids scurry back and forth on school days to visit with their "grandfriends" and engage in a variety of arts programs and community-building special events.

"My purpose was to bring old and young together and to dispel the notion that nursing homes are cold, forbidding places," said Wyman, who became director of the 104-bed facility in the fall of 1999.

More than that, the intergenerational programs have enriched the lives of students, residents, parents, teachers and the whole community.

"The residents are teaching the kids, but it's going just as much the other way also—the kids teach residents also. It makes them feel really important," said Christine Opelt, principal at Otis for the past decade.

Deloris Zwir, 87, a wheelchair-bound Bethesda resident, agreed.

"It's good for all of us," Zwir said. "It's important to bring kids up to be respectful of older people."

Some of her young friends "are bashful at first, but then they start asking questions like, 'What did you used to wear to school?' I try to make them feel at ease. There's a closeness in talking to them."

The term "grandfriends" was coined by a teacher at Otis, and everyone on both campuses uses it freely.

Otis student Katie Sherman, 12, a sixth-grader, said she will always





*Otis Elementary School students
Katie Sherman and Robert Mancini
walk to the Bethesda Care Center
to visit their senior friends.*

Eighty-eight-year-old Bethesda Care Center resident Elaine Overmyer colors with 12-year-old Otis Elementary School student Katie Sherman in the dining room of the care center.



remember the fun she and her grandfriend shared during the last school year.

“My grandfriend was nice; she never wanted to play board games. We just ate cookies and played cards. She liked to play rummy,” young Sherman giggled.

These relationships can grow extremely close, said Barbara Moran, a fifth-grade teacher at Otis.

“I guess I did not fully grasp the impact until a grandfriend died,” Moran said. “At the funeral, the family placed the story of her life that a student had written near the casket. This program is so good for the kids.”

Moran’s eyes filled with tears as she told the story, then sparkled as she spoke of a recent Grandparents Day program at Otis to which grandfriends were also invited.

“We had so many grandfriends we had to put the real grandparents in the back of the room,” Moran said, laughing.

In addition to informal visits, the Otis students and Bethesda residents also work together to

present community special events. For the last two years, the Bethesda campus has been the site of a community September 11th Day of Remembrance, which honors local National Guard reservists and emergency workers.

But it’s the unique arts-related programming that has captured the most attention in Fremont and surrounding communities.

A longtime art collector, Wyman said his interest in visual expression and education began early in life under the tutelage of his grandmother.

“Growing up, I was with my grandmother most of the time and I was dyslexic—she and my mother taught me how to use colors and art as a means to help make learning easier for me,” Wyman said.

The art programs tie in a variety of subjects kids learn at school. This year, students and residents are making African masks with a docent of the Toledo Museum of Art, Easter baskets, a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. quilt and U.S. flags through history.

For the opening of Bethesda’s new 25-bed Alzheimer’s unit in 2000, Wyman arranged for an on-site show of prints and paintings by Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore, Joan Miro and other leading 20th-century artists loaned by the Toledo Museum.

Bethesda also displays a long hallway full of artwork by Otis students, and sculpture by northwest Ohio artists grace the campus grounds. To celebrate Bethesda’s 25th anniversary this year, Wyman has formed a community arts committee to plan and raise funds for a sculpture garden and arboretum.

Nor are the literary arts neglected. Bethesda residents take part in reading books to the youth, a program funded by an Ohio Reads grant.

Bethesda activity coordinator Pat Balsizer said sometimes the relationships fostered between the two generations runs deeper than any quilt made or game of chess played.

“We had one situation where a student had experienced a family tragedy, but after spending time with her grandfriend she didn’t want to

get up and leave. You want to cry to look at those two together,” said Balsizer, who works with Fran Castillo, a volunteer coordinator and activities assistant, in planning the entire year of grandfriends activities.

“Some of the residents and students get so attached,” said Castillo.

Otis principal Opelt said the Ohio Reads program, the joint art projects, the sharing of time each

month playing games, talking and eating snacks, and the annual programs put on by both groups add to making her students better adults in the future.

“If kids are happy and feel good about themselves, that’s when the learning takes place. These kids look forward to meeting with their grandfriends. Most often it is the highlight of their week—it’s worth it,” said Opelt.

Wyman sums it up best when asked to describe the long-term impact of the grandfriends program.

“My grandmother had a saying: Do something. I doubt that we’re saving the world but we’re definitely doing something,” he said.

Something grand that’s creating friendly generations.

Rhonda Sewell is a newspaper reporter based in Toledo, Ohio.

Otis Elementary School teacher Barbara Moran talks with students Robert Mancini and Katie Sherman, who are visiting with grandfriends Dolores Zwir and Elaine Overmyer.



Zack and Paul, two workers at the Powerhouse Deliverance Center for Family and Community Service, said they have learned valuable lessons about respect, responsibility and work ethics through the program.



Helping Community Groups Rebuild Lives

By Anthony Wade • Photography by Thomas Touns and Martess Miller

Brick by brick, almost single-handedly during the past 14 years, Jeffrey Reed, a masonry contractor in Bay St. Louis, Miss., has been rebuilding young lives torn apart by drugs and crime.

Reed's program began 15 years ago when he approached local judges and offered an alternative to jail sentencing. He would mentor young offenders, teach them the bricklayer's trade, and help them find permanent work in the construction industry. More than 70 teenagers have come through his program, and all but two have stayed clear of further trouble with the law.

A few years ago, Reed formed a nonprofit organization called the Powerhouse Deliverance Center for Family and Community Services as a service ministry affiliated with his church. Last year, the group received a \$10,000 Compassion Capital Fund grant from Volunteers of America to expand and serve more young ex-offenders in the program designed to prevent drug use and criminal behavior.

"The grant came at a critical time in the organization's growth, not to mention a critical time in the lives of these young people," said Reed.



Participants are referred to the Powerhouse Deliverance Center program by churches, neighborhoods, police and the court system. The program teaches them professional and personal skills through hard work.

The Powerhouse Deliverance Center is typical of the small faith-based and community programs that receive much-needed financial and technical support through Volunteers of America's national faith- and community-based initiative.

"There's no shortage of vision and energy among emerging nonprofits," said Celeste Bagley, Volunteers of America's director of

strategic expansion. "But many lack the resources and management tools needed to make their visions work more effectively to serve people and communities in need."

Volunteers of America is investing nearly \$1 million annually in the work of small faith-based community groups, funded by major grants from the Compassion Capital Fund of the U.S. Department of Health

and Human Services—as part of the White House’s Faith-Based and Community Initiative—matched by contributions from Volunteers of America’s national endowment fund.

At the grassroots level, the funds are administered through Volunteers of America local offices in Mobile, serving Alabama and Mississippi Gulf Coast communities, and in Cincinnati, serving nearby communities in southwest Ohio, northern Kentucky and southeast Indiana.

Sub-grants averaging \$10,000 each are available to groups engaged in

six key service areas including homelessness, hunger, at-risk children and youth, rehabilitation of ex-offenders, rehabilitation of substance abusers and welfare-to-work.

Paul McLendon, director of the Volunteers of America Resource Center in Mobile, said the center plans to award as many as 16 grants this year out of 40 applications from Alabama and Mississippi nonprofits.

Most of the grants are ear-marked for capacity-building needs, such as new donor list management software that can help organizations to raise more money from the community

and secure its future, McLendon said. Other awards pay for grant writers, leveraging Volunteers of America’s investment to achieve an even larger return.

Meanwhile, the center offers ongoing training for leaders of small nonprofits. Topics range from financial management and nonprofit law to fundraising and board recruitment and development. “So far, we have provided seminar training directly for more than 300 different organizations,” McLendon said.

The center also publishes a monthly nonprofit management newsletter



CAIN volunteer Walt Hedglin, aka Santa Claus, asks children of a recipient family what they want for Christmas.

and assists start-up organizations with assessing community needs and designing effective programming.

Helping organizations from the ground up is also a feature of Volunteers of America's faith-based and community resource center in Cincinnati.

"This program is making it possible for local faith-based and community groups to build their infrastructure so they are better equipped to serve people.

Volunteers of America is proud to have a role helping these groups accomplish more in their communities," said Chris Lohrman, president and CEO of Volunteers of America in the Cincinnati, Ohio area.

Bob Ehram, director of the Ohio center, concurred. "We look for a well thought-out plan and good programs that answer real community needs. An idea chasing some money will not get funded. But if a nonprofit can demonstrate some success, we can help them to access larger grants. The bottom line is improving people's lives."

Ehram added that the grant-making process encourages coalition-building to stretch available resources.

For example, Churches Active in Northside (CAIN), a coalition of eight Cincinnati churches, used its Volunteers of America grant to improve delivery of a wide variety of services to more than 200 families in Cincinnati's northside community. From providing for emergency needs like food, clothing and shelter, the coalition has expanded into counseling and other services, often in partnership with other nonprofits.



Program Director Bob Ehram of Volunteers of America in Cincinnati, Churches Active in Northside (CAIN) Executive Director MiMi Chamberlain (back left) and staff Cathy Graham (back row, third from left) celebrated Christmas with two families participating in the CAIN program.

"Churches have always been on the front lines of meeting emergency needs," said MiMi Chamberlain, CAIN's executive director. "We've had a 10-year formal history of serving emergency needs and planting seeds of hope for Northside's most vulnerable citizens. Now we can do more."

Some grants go toward upgrading computers and software. But again, technology investments should produce very down-to-earth results, Ehram explained.

"Our nonprofit partners have improved the way they track the people they help, including the tracking of outcomes as well as activities. Others have used new computers to provide job skills training for the unemployed."

The use of federal grant monies to fund faith-based nonprofits is "nothing new," said McLendon. "What the new federal initiatives have done is to remove any prejudice against faith-based groups when they compete with purely secular organizations for funding."

"The faith-based center here in Alabama helps insure that our spiritual roots are preserved and strengthened," said Wallace Davis, president and CEO of Volunteers of America in the Mobile, Alabama area. "Our role is to support and assist other organizations of all kinds, and that has enriched our own organization in countless ways."

Anthony Wade is an editor with The Alabama Baptist magazine, based in Birmingham, Ala.

Some *Fantastic* Evening!

Volunteers of America's Western Fantasy is a 10-gallon hatful of fun for Denver's movers and shakers—and a lifeline for thousands of people in need

BY ROBERT D'AMICO • PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL THACH

Every year, on a Saturday night in late October, thousands of big-hearted Coloradans slap on their cowboy hats, wrap themselves in designer denim and pull on their fanciest tooled-leather boots to go steppin' at a haute hoe-down known as Volunteers of America's Western Fantasy.

And when the annual wild west wingding is done, they will have raised about a million dollars to support Volunteers of America's life-changing services for their neighbors in need.

"About one third of the fundraising dollars we need each year comes from the Western Fantasy," said Dianna Kunz, president and CEO of Volunteers of America in Colorado. "Essential is definitely a word I

would use to describe the event. Critical is another."

So are the programs that the event helps sustain. Just ask Nancy Good, one of 1,700 Denver seniors who receive a home delivered meal each day through Volunteers of America's Meals on Wheels program.

"It's wonderful to see someone coming down the sidewalk every day, no matter what the weather, with a friendly face and a smile, and a box with lunch," Good said.

Singer Lee Greenwood sings, "God Bless the U.S.A." to Sharon Magness, gala co-chair, as she rides into the 10th anniversary Western Fantasy gala on Thunder, the Denver Broncos' mascot.



Volunteers of America board member Larry Romrell and his wife, Cheryl, rev up the Western Fantasy crowd with the Harley Davidson they donate each year during the live auction.



“And there’s always some sort of surprise—like a piece of chocolate cake,” she added, “And they’re always glad to see you. It makes a big difference in my day.”

Western Fantasy is also a mainstay for Volunteers of America’s Brandon Center, an emergency residential shelter for battered women and their children, and Rainbow House, a daycare center for children affected by HIV/AIDs. Since 1993, the event has raised more than \$12 million for these and other programs.

“It’s been a showcase for the important work done by Volunteers of America, and that’s what makes Western Fantasy, well, so fantastic,” said Mark Baumann, president and chief operating officer of Starz Encore, the Denver-based cable TV

company that has been a long-time corporate sponsor.

Baumann served as corporate co-chair for the October 25, 2003 event, which drew 1,200 guests and raised \$1 million.

“People got together and had a wonderful time,” he said. “But without the cause, it was just a party.”

Like many great ideas, Western Fantasy was born of necessity and sketched out on a napkin over lunch.

In late 1993, Volunteers of America in Colorado learned it might face a \$260,000 budget shortfall in the coming year due to community-wide reductions in United Way funding. The senior nutrition services and the Brandon Center would be hardest hit.

As Kunz explained to an emergency board meeting: “That’s not the kind



“About one third of the fundraising dollars we need each year comes from the Western Fantasy.”





Sharon Magness and Jean Galloway, chairs for the Western Fantasy in Denver, share a moment with children at the Volunteers of America Brandon Center for battered women and their children.

of money you can make up by cutting back on office supplies or long distance telephone calls.”

After the meeting, board chair Jean Galloway invited her friend Sharon Magness, a philanthropist and fellow board member, to lunch. Magness was willing to help in any way she could with one caveat: “I’ll do anything but another black-tie and sequin-gown event,” she told Galloway.

“Fair enough,” Galloway agreed. “But what if we created an event so different and imaginative it couldn’t miss? What about something that celebrated Denver’s heritage?”

So they began to envision something where people could dress up in high-end western duds. Neither woman wanted the event to be held in some stuffy hotel ballroom.

Instead, they decided on the National Western Events Center, a somewhat prosaic indoor arena with a dirt floor more suited to rodeos than soirees.

When Kunz first visited the less-than-glamorous venue, she thought, “I can see the western part of it, but where’s the fantasy?”

The entertainment had to be first class—“the best country-western entertainment available,” said Magness. They wanted the event to evoke patriotism because, after all, Galloway said, “Volunteers of America is as red, white and blue as it gets.”

Galloway and Magness began scribbling out the details on a napkin. The only thing lacking was a name. But by the time Galloway got back to her office, she said, “It hit me—we had created a Western

Fantasy. I called Sharon, she liked it and the name just kind of stuck.”

Galloway, then vice president of community affairs for a local network television station, and Magness, the wife of late Bob Magness, a pioneer in the cable television industry, quickly attracted an enviable roster of volunteers and corporate sponsors, including the *Denver Post* newspaper and the Denver Broncos football team. Even so, some of the early planning was strictly seat-of-the-britches.

At the first planning committee meeting, someone asked, “What kind of budget are we talking about?” Magness looked at Galloway, Galloway looked at

Magness, and both said, “Look, we’re gonna raise the money, then we’ll have a budget.”

Years later, when asked if she’d ever had any doubts that Western Fantasy would fly, Galloway smiled and said, “Well, we didn’t do a lot of reflecting, we didn’t spend time wondering, ‘Gee, will it succeed?’ We just charged ahead.”

The first Western Fantasy, with singer John Denver as the headline entertainer, attracted 800 people and raised \$350,000, more than enough to cover the budget shortfall.

And things only got better. By year two, 1,200 cowboy- and cowgirl-wannabes ambled to the National Western Events Center, this time to



Featured entertainer Jo Dee Messina had the Western Fantasy crowd dancing all night.

Over 1,200 attendees filled the National Western Event Center for the Western Fantasy gala.





Volunteers of America President Charles Gould, Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper and Volunteers of America National Board Chairman Francis Hesselbein hold the Caring Community Award, presented to the Denver Community.

listen to Kenny Rogers. By year three, attendance was up to 1,300, and the evening's net topped \$1 million.

In 1999, after raising \$1.7 million at the event itself, Sharon Magness and co-chairs Jerome and Mary Rossick pledged additional funds to bring the total to \$3 million, helping to build a commercial-grade kitchen and food warehouse at Volunteers of America's new headquarters in Denver.

Western Fantasy has become one of the most successful charity fundraisers in Colorado, and certainly the most distinctive. The old rodeo palace has been done up with dazzling Western décor, including glowing neon cactuses. Guests have panned for gold and other baubles courtesy of a local jeweler. And they have been entertained by some of the biggest stars

in country and western music—Brooks & Dunn, Alabama, Barbara Mandrell, George Jones and Kenny Chesney.

Perhaps the guests put on the best show of all, with glamorous interpretations of western fashion. There have been white suede and pearl-encrusted gowns, fleecy chaps worn over body suits, velvet cavalry jackets appointed with elk bones and amethysts, and cowboy boots in hot pink lizard skin.

Western Fantasy is such a “don't miss” event that even a blizzard can't keep folks away. In 1997, an unexpected October snowstorm hit Denver. Television news bulletins and a five-hour phone-a-thon alerted guests that the event had been postponed to Sunday night.

“It was like planning a whole new event in 24 hours,” Galloway

Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper and local media personality Ed Greene enjoy the Western Fantasy festivities.



recalled, still amazed that there were only 300 no-shows out of 1,380 expected guests.

“That experience highlights the impact of this event in our community,” Kunz said. “Western Fantasy isn’t just about fund raising. It’s about friend raising.”

Kathleen Rae King, Volunteers of America’s national vice president for development, agreed.

“Western Fantasy not only raises a tremendous amount of money, it’s an invitation to the community to join in the important work we do,” King said. “It shows what can happen when generous people unite behind a movement. Western Fantasy is in a class of its own, but it’s also a great model for Volunteers of America in other cities.”

Meanwhile, Galloway still marvels at what the random thoughts Sharon Magness sketched out a decade ago has led to.

“I have to pinch myself sometimes,” Galloway said. “I’m really in awe of the way it’s grown.”

She paused and smiled.

“You know, it really has been magical.”



From top left, guests and committee members Jane Netzorg, Skip Netzorg, Dianne Eddolls, Glenn Jones; Dana Rehbun, Bonnie Mandarich, Pam Ruschmeyer; Linda Goto, Leo Goto and Sue Goss celebrate at the Western Fantasy gala.

AMERICAN ★ SPIRIT

A WELL EARNED REST

On May 1, 2004, the first morning of their retirement after 69 years of combined service at Volunteers of America's Valley Manor Care Center in Montrose, Colo., John and Elizabeth Avila say they plan to sleep late and have a leisurely breakfast together.

It will be a well-earned rest. For the last few years the Avilas have been getting up well before their 4 a.m. working day begins to have breakfast together in their Olathe, Colo., home. It is a special time together for them in the quiet of the early morning. Then it's off to work on the center's custodial staff.

John Fitzmaurice, regional manager of Volunteers of America's healthcare facilities in Colorado, said he, the staff and residents will miss the Avilas very much. He believes it will be a big challenge to find two new employees who are as dedicated, punctual and hardworking as the Avilas.

Finding their equals in spirit may well be impossible, Fitzmaurice added.

"John and Elizabeth embody the heart and soul of Volunteers of America and its mission to serve in all ways possible," he said. "They take enormous care in everything

they do and make each task an act of service."

Valley Manor's gleaming vinyl floors prove the point over and over again.

John Avila joined the center's staff in 1969, followed by Elizabeth in 1970.

Both expressed a little sadness about leaving. "I have been very lucky to work here all these years,"

Elizabeth said. "The staff and residents are always like family to us. This has been our home."

Still, the Avilas are looking forward to having more time to spend with their children and grandchildren, to volunteer at Valley Manor and to travel.

They also plan to do a lot of fishing for trout and largemouth bass on nearby Grand Mesa Lake, although it could mean many more pre-dawn mornings for the couple. The habits of a lifetime will be hard to put away.



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's innovative services respond to community needs to help abused and neglected children, youth at risk, the elderly, people with disabilities, the homeless, and many others. Every year, nearly 1.7 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

VolunteersofAmerica.org.

