

SPIRIT

The Magazine of Volunteers of America® • Spring 2005



IN THIS ISSUE:

*Providing a haven and opportunity for homeless adults • Helping people with disabilities overcome employment obstacles • Even Start gives young families the tools to succeed
Providing housing for seniors, people with disabilities, and families combats a growing crisis*



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of America®

SPIRIT

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TOGETHER AGAIN

Elizabeth Bennett has her life and children back. Her experience at the Volunteers of America's Bailey's Crossroads Community Shelter gave her the tools and the strength to free herself of substance abuse problems and regain custody of her children. Through hard work, determination, and the assistance and support of the staff and programs at the Bailey's Shelter, Bennett is once again living, working, loving and bowling.

SPRING 2005

Features

6

AN UPLIFTING START AT
THE END OF THE LINE

Bailey's Crossroads Community Shelter
in Northern Virginia provides a haven
and chance for a better life for the
homeless.



11

DISABILITY DOESN'T
MEAN INABILITY

The Red River Employment Service in
Shreveport, La., helps people with
disabilities find meaningful
employment.

17

LEVELING THE
PLAYING FIELD

Programs for young families in
South Dakota help them overcome
obstacles to building a safe, secure
and successful life.

20

MEETING THE
CHALLENGE OF
AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Volunteers of America provides
affordable housing to seniors,
families and people with disabilities
nationwide.



Departments

IN BRIEF 3

GIVING 5

AMERICAN SPIRIT 24



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for individual and community involvement.
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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

On The Road To Self-Sufficiency



Charles W. Gould, National President of Volunteers of America

We see them at metro stops and in front of churches, on street corners and huddled under blankets on park benches. Our nation's homeless.

If we're honest with ourselves, we will admit these people make us uncomfortable. We may stop long enough to drop some pocket change in their coffee cup, but we rarely linger to converse; we rarely look them in the eye.

The homeless are among the most powerless people in our culture; but when we come face to face with them and their plight, it is we who feel powerless.

Homelessness is a stark reality in our country. Few people are aware of the magnitude of the problem. For every man or woman standing on a street corner with an outstretched hand, there are thousands more who are hidden from our view. They live in campgrounds, cars or camped out on other people's floors.

Volunteers of America has long been committed to helping the homeless in our midst; and this commitment is as strong today as it has ever been. It is not, after all, enough for us to offer the homeless a cup of coffee to get through the morning, or a sandwich and a blanket

to get through the night. We need to offer them something more: tools to help them succeed in life.

In this issue of *SPIRIT*, you will read about people like Louis Edwards, Kenneth Chamblain, Elizabeth Bennett and others who found hope at one of our shelters: Bailey's Crossroads Community Shelter, located just outside of Washington, D.C., in Northern Virginia.

The residents are given the tools necessary for a second chance at life. They receive drug and alcohol counseling, life skills training, medical and mental health referrals and employment assistance.

Kenneth Chamblain calls Bailey's Crossroads "a lifesaver." Elizabeth Bennett calls her experience at the shelter "a blessing."

Some call Bailey's Crossroads "the end of the road," as it's a place people often land after trying everything else. It may be the end of the old road that led to self-destruction, but it's the beginning of a new road that leads to self-sufficiency.

In this issue, you'll also meet others committed to becoming self-sufficient. In Louisiana, Peggy Buck, Thelma Vance and D'an Gates are employed in their communities, in spite of personal disabilities, with

the help of Volunteers of America's Red River Employment Services.

In South Dakota, Volunteers of America is helping young local families and immigrant refugees break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy.

And across the United States, we are building new and preserving existing affordable housing for seniors, for low-income individuals, families and for people with disabilities.

You'll meet Fred Lofton, who recently moved into a newly constructed Volunteers of America senior community in the Denver area; also Eric Savage, who leads the resident council at Volunteers of America's Light House in Asheville, N.C., a residence for people with spinal injuries and multiple sclerosis.

Those stories as well as the other stories in this issue, convey how Volunteers of America is making a difference every day in the lives of people across the country. Please join us in celebrating their success.

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

Charles W. Gould
National President

◆
The homeless are among the most powerless people in our culture; but when we come face to face with them and their plight, it is we who feel powerless.
◆

IN BRIEF

Building Affordable Housing

Volunteers of America completed nearly 1,300 units in 22 new

housing communities last year to provide affordable housing for low-income seniors, families and people with a wide range of physical and mental disabilities.

Another 3,725 units in 55 new housing communities are under construction or development in two dozen states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico.

These projects are scheduled for completion during the next several years.

Volunteers of America is one of the nation's largest providers of affordable housing. The organization has been working for more than a decade to increase

the construction of new affordable housing and to preserve existing units.

“Expanded and improved mechanisms for financing increased development of

Volunteers of America President Charles Gould said.



Volunteers of America recently opened a low-income senior living community in Middletown, Ohio.

In testimony before Congress, Volunteers of America has urged increased funding for federal programs that support affordable housing construction in the United States—particularly for the elderly.

elderly housing with a continuum of services is absolutely essential if the nation is to adequately meet the need for affordable housing, adult day care, home care, assisted living, and skilled nursing facilities care for seniors in the coming decades,”

Two new low-income housing communities for seniors were recently opened by Volunteers of America in Middletown, Ohio, and Denver.

“Volunteers of America is committed to providing seniors in Ohio and Colorado and across the United States with safe affordable places to live. As a

national, faith-based organization, we have a moral obligation to address one of the greatest challenges in our country—the shortage of affordable housing for low-income seniors, families and people with disabilities,” Gould said.

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IN BRIEF

Volunteers of America Served Nearly 2 Million People in 2004

Last year, Volunteers of America served nearly 2 million people in 44 states, according to the organization's *2004 Annual Report*. These services included more than 100 distinct program types that touched the lives of people of all ages and ranged from prevention programs to in-depth remedial services.

Volunteers of America focuses its endeavors in three broad program areas:

Encouraging Positive Development

Volunteers of America encourages positive development for troubled and at-risk children and youth, while also promoting the healthy development of all children, adolescents and their families. Programs included prevention, early intervention, crisis intervention, long-term services,

and community partnerships for young people from birth through age 21. The organization provided services for about 560,000 children and youth in 2004.

Fostering Independence

Volunteers of America fosters the health and independence of the elderly and persons with disabilities, mental illness and HIV/AIDS through quality affordable housing, health care services and a wide range of community services. In 2004, about 300,000 persons were served in these programs.

Promoting Self-Sufficiency

Volunteers of America promotes self-sufficiency for individuals and families who have experienced homelessness or other personal crisis, including chemical dependency, involvement with the corrections system and unemployment.

Programs include: affordable and supportive housing; emergency services; transitional housing; health education; employment services; substance abuse treatment; and rehabilitation services for ex-offenders returning to the community. These programs served more than 1 million people in 2004.

In fiscal year 2004 more than 88 cents of every dollar Volunteers of America spent went to provide programs and services to people in need according to the organization's annual report. These programs and services were delivered by more than 15,000 paid staff and more than 90,000 volunteers.

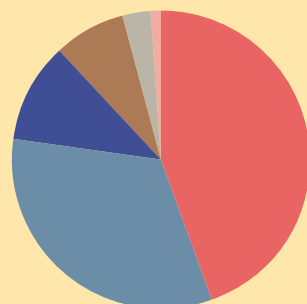
The newly released *Volunteers of America 2004 Annual Report* is available at VolunteersofAmerica.org.

Volunteers of America served nearly 2 million people ... according to the organization's *2004 Annual Report*...

Volunteers of America focuses its endeavors in three broad program areas:

Encouraging Positive Development; Fostering Independence; and Promoting Self-Sufficiency.

Impact Categories



Fostering Independence	44.93%
Promoting Self-Sufficiency	32.61%
Encouraging Positive Development	10.68%
Management - local	7.64%
Fund Raising	2.91%
Management - national	1.23%

GIVING

Callister Foundation Fights Substance Abuse

After a long and difficult battle with substance abuse, Edward Callister was on his way to overcoming his personal problems with the help and support of Volunteers of America in Utah.

Earlier in his life, Callister had attended two different residential programs that were costly and neither program had provided the answer he was seeking. He became tired of spending his own and his parents' money. He wanted to be rid of his drug addiction and knew that help from Volunteers of America was available to anyone. After a stay at Volunteers of America's detoxification center—often going on the Courtesy Patrol Van as a volunteer to assist others with substance abuse—he entered a residential program. But, his struggle continued, and in April 1996, he was killed in a single-car rollover.

One of the charities listed in Edward Callister's obituary announcement was Volunteers of America. He appreciated the fellowship and non-judgmental support he received. Because of his fondness for the program, and the progress

he made, his parents Lou and Ellen Callister decided to help support the work of the Volunteers of America Utah Adult Detoxification Center. The couple also formed the Edward G. Callister Foundation. The foundation is dedicated to increasing awareness and knowledge about the bio-

logical, personal and social factors that underlie substance abuse.

medical services, medications, and vitamins at both centers. "Edward had been through several treatment programs and nothing worked," said Lou Callister. "He had a terrible craving for cocaine and alcohol. He relapsed several times and finally decided to

The Center for Women and Children is also important to the Callister family because it provides homeless women struggling with substance abuse a safe, healing environment at a moment's notice.

"I'll never forget it. There is this book of obituary clippings. When I looked through that book, I saw a picture of a beautiful girl from a wealthy family who had overdosed. The people who end up here at the center—they come from all walks of life," Lou Callister said.

Jeff St. Romain, president of Volunteers of America Utah, said, "Ellen and Lou Callister are remarkable people. They dealt with the tragedy of their son's death by putting in motion projects that will save other individuals and families from the pain and tragedy of substance abuse. Their determination to make a difference in the lives of people suffering from addiction will make it possible to provide an opportunity for individuals to build a new and better life."

refer himself to the Volunteers of America Utah Detoxification Center."

The Callisters became interested in the work of the Center for Women and Children after touring the facility and seeing how Volunteers of America was helping women overcome homelessness, and drug and alcohol addiction.



Lou and Ellen Callister

Elizabeth Bennett makes breakfast for her family, which is together again thanks to the help of Volunteers of America and her own determination.



An Uplifting Start at the End of the Line

Volunteers of America's Bailey's Crossroads Community Shelter provides a haven and the opportunity for a new start in life for homeless people in Northern Virginia.

BY MARYANNE ARTHUR ★ PHOTOGRAPHY BY CARL ERICSON

“So many people see the homeless, but they don’t want to get involved,” said Louis Edwards, a former resident of Volunteers of America’s Bailey’s Crossroads Community Shelter in Fairfax County, Va.

He should know. Abandoned by his parents, Edwards spent his formative years living with strangers in foster homes, working odd jobs and battling schizophrenia in mental hospitals. With no place to call home, he wandered into the woods of Virginia’s Rt. 1 corridor and became another statistic in the county’s homeless tally.

“It was tough living on the streets,” said Edwards. “My health deteriorated. I abused alcohol. I was just plain tired.” For several

years, he survived on the fringes of society. “Then, one day, I dropped in to Bailey’s Crossroads Community Shelter,” he said. “And it did wonders for me.”

COVERING ALL THE BASES

Known on the streets as the “end of the line,” Bailey’s Crossroads Community Shelter in Northern Virginia, operated by Volunteers of America Chesapeake, is a place where the toughest cases reside. Here, individuals gather from diverse backgrounds with some of the most serious personal issues, such as mental illness, poor physical health, and alcohol or drug addiction. All are homeless. And, all have entered the shelter willingly with one goal in mind—to reclaim and rebuild their lives.

“Nine out of every 10 people who enter Bailey’s have exhausted all other resources and really humbled themselves to come here,” explained Melissa Arnold, assistant program director. “They expect us to step up to the plate and help them.”

Through the collaborative efforts of Fairfax County government and Volunteers of America, the shelter serves nearly 1,400 of the Washington, D.C., area’s most vulnerable homeless population each year. In addition to short-term emergency housing, the shelter provides a comprehensive array of human services, including alcohol and drug abuse counseling, life skills training, medical and mental health referrals, employment assistance and transportation to treatment programs.



Virginia Peyton Unger, a case manager at Bailey's, helps residents set goals and rebuild their lives.

"Homelessness is a very complex issue... Our program helps our residents overcome adversity while maintaining self-dignity and hope."

**...Alonzo Davis,
Volunteers of America
program director.**

After the standard 30 to 60-day stay, most clients return to Bailey's for daily counseling and life skills classes. An optional aftercare program, with up to two years of transitional housing and support services, helps individuals make the move to independent living.

"Homelessness is a very complex issue," said Alonzo Davis, Volunteers of America program director. "Our program helps our residents overcome adversity while maintaining self-dignity and hope."

For residents like Kenneth Chamblain, Bailey's meant the difference between life and death. After three years of sobriety, Chamblain spiraled back into drug and alcohol addiction. He admits he was lucky to be rescued by friends and admitted to the trauma unit at INOVA Fairfax Hospital, where a discharge nurse referred him to the Volunteers of America program at Bailey's.

But, it was Chamblain who made the phone call and the commitment to stay. "This shelter is a lifesaver," he said. "Without it, I'd be living on the streets in the cold of

winter, taking mood altering chemicals and ignoring my physical health."

MAKING THE COMMITMENT

In this cozy 50-bed facility, all residents make the same pledge to improve their lives. Each person signs a contract agreeing to perform daily assigned chores, save 75 percent of their earned income, and actively work on objectives as outlined in an individual services plan.

"This is a working shelter," explained 83-year-old case manager Virginia Peyton Unger. "We only work with people who are willing to work as hard as we are."

For nearly 50 years, Unger has dedicated herself to human services work. At Bailey's, she served 14 years as front desk clerk, then as a residential services aide and now case manager, assisting individuals with preparing and sticking to a daily action plan. "Through the years, I've learned that I don't have to win all the time; but I do have to keep trying," said Unger.

Elizabeth Bennett can attest to Unger's tenacity. Unger was Bennett's case manager at the shelter. "She kept my spirits up and constantly reminded me that I better get up because no one else will do things for me," Bennett recalled.

Bennett's story is typical of many who struggle with addiction. Abusing crack cocaine since high school, she made a clean break for eight years. In 2001, her past life came rushing back. "I knew all the tools, I just didn't want to use them," she said. "I gave up everything—my home, my husband, my kids, even my dog—to get high again."

When she did, Bennett ended up with a felony charge that required

jail time. That's when she contacted Volunteers of America. "I made a choice to allow drugs to take control of my life," she admitted. "But, I also put forth the effort to enter the program at Bailey's."

Bennett moved into the shelter in December 2001, while fulfilling her weekend jail sentence. She completed an intense counseling program, shared house chores and mentored other residents. Within six months, Bennett successfully completed her service plan and moved to a transitional housing facility. She regained custody of her three children, son Kelvin and daughters Ikea and Kelvetta. She secured full-time work at a local print shop. And, she returned to her favorite pastime—bowling.

Now, only two years after leaving Bailey's, Bennett is still celebrating the successes she has worked so hard to achieve. She is engaged, has applied for her driver's license and is saving money to buy a home of her own. "I'm so proud of everything Liz has accomplished in such a short time," Unger beamed.

"My experience at the shelter was a blessing," Bennett said. "Now, I want to give back what was given to me."

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Like Bennett, Edwards ventured into Bailey's Crossroads Community Shelter and received the help he needed most. Coaxed indoors from the Rt. 1 corridor, Edwards now lives in a modest apartment in Alexandria, Va., and keeps in touch with his daughters, ages 27 and 25. Thanks to his experience at the Volunteers of America program, he believes his life's mission is to act as an advocate for the homeless. "I've been there," Edwards said. "I can relate."

Each month, Edwards returns to Bailey's as a volunteer to counsel current residents and to help case managers develop effective service plans. He also serves on a Fairfax-Falls Church area homeless council and volunteers at the outreach program for homeless people who are mentally ill in the Mt. Vernon, Va., area. During weekends, he reaches

"I made a choice to allow drugs to take control of my life... But, I also put forth the effort to enter the program at Bailey's."

**...Elizabeth Bennett,
former resident,
Bailey's Crossroads Shelter**

The Bailey's Quality Assurance Committee, made up of residents, staff and volunteers, meets each month to discuss programs and services, and to make suggestions. Participating in a recent meeting were (l to r) resident Kenneth Chamblain, volunteer W. Laliberté, resident Terri Johnson, staff member Wilbert Shaw, and volunteer Louis Edwards.





Roseline Bwaku (seated) is greeted by her case manager, Virginia Peyton Unger, during lunch.

“The staff helps anyone who comes here and needs assistance... I’m very happy to be here.”

...Roseline Bwaku

out to homeless people in the Route 1 corridor where he used to live.

“I try to get people into programs,” explained Edwards. “I tell them, ‘Thanks to Volunteers of America’s program at Bailey’s, I survived.’ Sometimes I can help them understand what’s going on in their lives. And, I can get other people to talk to the homeless too. That’s what I do.”

Edwards is one of a number of people who volunteer their time to help others in the program.

As part of its community outreach, Bailey’s also offers a drop-in program two days a week,

designed to help homeless people that live outside the shelter. The homeless can bathe, eat a hot meal and wash their clothes.

That’s how Roseline Bwaku came to Volunteers of America. An immigrant from Uganda, Bwaku arrived in America with nothing. She haphazardly encountered Bailey’s drop-in program and was fortunate that the facility had a full-time opening. “The staff helps anyone who comes here and needs assistance,” observed Bwaku, who is living at the facility while she looks for a job and independent housing. “I’m very happy to be here.”

SYMBOL OF HOPE

“It’s our job to really make a difference in someone’s life,” said Melissa Arnold, assistant program director at Bailey’s. She and her staff foster an atmosphere of determination and dedication that resonates far beyond the walls of the 19-year-old shelter.

While some programs only chip away at the needs of the homeless, Volunteers of America’s Bailey’s Crossroads Community Shelter provides constant support for the county’s most vulnerable population. “We are very pleased with its stability and success,” applauded Diana Lotito, homeless services manager for Fairfax County.

For Liz Bennett, Louis Edwards and the thousands of clients who pass through its doors each year, the Volunteers of America’s Bailey’s Crossroads Community Shelter is not the end of the line. It’s an uplifting start to a new and better life.



Maryanne Arthur is a freelance writer and owner of Just Write, LLC, in Baltimore.



D'An Gates is one of Red River Employment Services' success stories.

DISABILITY DOESN'T MEAN INABILITY

By Karl Hasten * Photography by Scott Griffin

A person with disabilities—emotional, mental or physical—usually faces tremendous barriers and challenges to finding and keeping a job. Helping people to overcoming these obstacles is the calling of Volunteers of America's Red River Employment Services.



Peggy Buck is excited to have her first real job as a housekeeper for Marriott. She is grateful to Volunteers of America for helping prepare, coach and support her.

“I could use four more like Peggy Buck,” said Hal Watts, executive housekeeper at the Marriott Residence Inn in Bossier City, La. Buck, who has her first “real” job because of the Volunteers of America’s Red River Employment Services, is pleased and enthusiastic about her work.

“It has made me a better person,” Buck said with confidence. “The friends I have made here are like a second family. I feel a heightened sense of acceptance and belonging.”

Buck feels she is developing life skills in her job that also serve her well at home. Kris Carrier, employment specialist with Red River Employment, was instrumental in placing Buck in her job as a housekeeper. “We always try to connect the right person to the appropriate job,” Carrier said. “Peggy and Marriott are a perfect match,” he said. “Kris gave me hands-on training,” Buck said. “I wasn’t just thrown out there on my own.”

Watts is Buck’s supervisor and her biggest fan. “She has such a positive

attitude and I have seen her open up from being very quiet to becoming more receptive and interactive. She has exceeded my expectations,” Watts said.

While Buck has been developing new and expanded job skills, Watts said he has also been learning from her. “Working around someone with a disability has been a revelation,” he said. “Since I started observing Peggy’s example I have gotten more patient with my own kids and family, appreciate the small moments more fully, don’t let little things get to me, am not as critical as I was, and don’t take things for granted like I used to.”

Growth seems to be a two-way street not only for Buck and Watts, but for all the Red River Employment workers and their supervisors as well. Without exception the supervisors speak of being impressed—even inspired—by the attitude and commitment of the people that Red River Employment places in jobs.

Chuck Meehan, president and CEO of Volunteers of America North Louisiana, said, “The Red River program assesses, trains and finds jobs for people with a wide range of disabilities. Working what are often their first jobs in the real world, many people with disabilities prove to be model employees and their success stories are truly inspiring.”

Clay Cook, owner of Cook’s Culinary Company, visited with Lisa Brandeburg, public relations and development director for Volunteers of America of North Louisiana, last year at church one day and asked if the Red River program might have someone that would be good for a position with his company. Cook runs a top of the line catering business and restaurant.

The result of Cook’s inquiry was that Red River Employment was able to place Thelma Vance in a full time position with Cook’s company. Vance cleans, washes dishes, and does some food preparation work as well. Vance had heard of Volunteers of America’s Red River Employment program through Louisiana’s Mental Health Rehabilitation program at the food stamp office. He worked with employment specialist Kris Carrier at Red River Employment in counseling and job skills training.

“Red River Employment is very important for people with disabilities,” Vance said. “They take you through all the steps to be able to



Red River Artists Overcome Disabilities

Folk artist Donnie R. Cutliffe was visiting her mother last year when she heard the alarming sound of sirens outside. Looking out the front door, she was stunned to see that the fire trucks were speeding toward her own house, which was on fire. She lost practically everything in the fire, including a beloved pet and some of her artwork.

Fortunately, many pieces of her artwork were at the Volunteers of America's Red River Employment office, and several local galleries because Cutliffe was participating in the organization's annual calendar and art exhibition.

For the second year in a row Volunteers of America's Red River Employment Services has produced a calendar of work done by people with disabilities and displayed their work. The 2005 calendar and art displays provide the artists a wider audience and draw attention to the employment program. Each artist is given a number of the calendars that they can sell themselves and keep the proceeds. The Campus Collectibles Antiques Gallery near Centenary College in Shreveport has an ongoing display of many of the pieces of art done by the artists.

The artwork included represents a broad spectrum of styles and techniques—and also disabilities. One of the featured artists, Michael Hilburn, (see page 15) paints

by holding the brushes in the toes of his left foot. To see his extraordinary work you would never guess the artist had any disability.

Kathie Troquille, an extremely gifted artist who painted holding the brush in her teeth, was featured in both calendars from 2004 and 2005. Troquille died in December 2004. One of her last paintings is featured in the month of July in the 2005 calendar.

The calendar project was the idea of Volunteers of America's Red River Employment Vice President Brian Byrd, who founded the employment service. Byrd felt the project would help demonstrate the artists' abilities and talents in a public forum and give them an opportunity to gain in self-sufficiency through generating additional income.

The staff at M&M Communications Concepts in Shreveport donate their time as art directors for the project and Casaic Printing in Shreveport prints the calendars.

In addition to the financial potential and elevated exposure, this innovative calendar project also gives the artists involved an increased sense of self and a greater confidence in their work. "I feel I'm moving up as an artist," Cutliffe said.

Copies of the 2005 calendar are available from Volunteers of America of North Louisiana, 360 Jordan Street, Shreveport, LA 71101 for \$15 each.

do the job. Kris comes with you to make sure the transition is easy—sort of like a safety net.”

“Thelma has fit right in,” Cook said, “and does her job very well. She is self-motivated, has a great sense of humor, and everyone here likes her and respects her hard work ethic. Red River Employment makes sure the people they send out to jobs have been properly trained and counseled so they are well prepared and are not set up to fail.”

“I am basically a very shy person,” Vance admitted, “but working at Cook’s has given me a lot more confidence and self-esteem. Now I can cope with problems when they arise.”

Vance has battled a disability for most of her life and working in a

friendly, accepting environment has made a great difference in her life. Prior to this job with Cook’s Culinary, she was living with her mother.

Her new job has given her the independence of her own apartment and a car, and she can now have her son with her as well. “It is a blessing to be able to have my son live with me,” Vance said, “I’m proud of myself.” Everyone at Cook’s is like extended family and I feel at home and at ease there. “I know God sent me here,” she said.

“I’m thankful that we serve a God of second chances,” said Leonard Gates, custodial supervisor at Shreveport’s First United Methodist Church. Through a connection at Red River Employment he was able

to offer one of those second chances to Elijah Henderson.

Though originally from Shreveport, Henderson had rambled around the country from coast to coast before returning home a few years back in need of a job.

“I feel this is the first place I have belonged,” said Henderson regarding his position as custodian with First United Methodist Church.

In the late 90s Gates began having Red River Employment bring clients down to the church just to see a working environment. Three years ago Gates took his involvement to a new level when he hired Henderson. That is a decision he has never regretted.

“I get a lot of satisfaction,” Gates said, “in seeing people improve. I



Clay Cook, owner of Cook's Culinary Co., hired Thelma Vance and says that she is an excellent addition to his catering business.

Elijah Henderson takes a break from work to talk with Brian Byrd, Volunteers of America's Red River Employment vice president.



have seen Elijah become more responsible and more concerned about job assignments. If I assign him a task, I don't have to be going behind him to check on him. I know the job will get done. His attitude has improved and he has no problem following directions and interacting with people. He has a 'can do' attitude."

"I feel better about myself than I ever have," Henderson said. "I feel good about coming to work."

Like Vance and other Red River Employment success stories, Henderson thrives on the increased independence that comes with productivity and a stable job. "I have my own house with my own telephone and cable television," he said proudly.

Henderson has dealt with his disability head-on. Meeting him today, he has a warm smile and looks at least a decade younger than his 62 years.

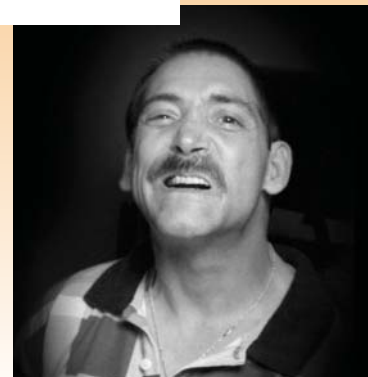
People placed in jobs by Volunteers of America's program all benefit from being in a positive and supportive environment. Sometimes just a simple word of encouragement can make all the difference in someone's life. That is particularly true if they have spent years bombarded by discouraging messages.

D'An Gates, one of Red River Employment's latest success stories, had to overcome a family that didn't believe she could be successful in a job. She is now cashier at the Centenary College Cafeteria and her supervisor Christine Walsh says she wishes all of her employees was as self-motivated and responsible.

"Gates is the perfect employee, always happy, always smiling, and very focused. If she has a down time where she is not needed on the register, she will find something to do. You will never hear her saying that's not my job," Walsh said.



Michael Hilburn paints by holding the brushes in the toes of his left foot. To see his extraordinary work you would never guess the artist had any disability.



Gates, 37 lives in a group home and rides to work on a program van. She is living away from her family for the first time in her life and her beautiful smile says it all as she talks about her first boyfriend. Gates has learned to think ahead, manage her time, and watch the clock, as she has gotten more comfortable with her job. "If I don't know something," she said confidently, "I just ask."

"To see someone whose confidence and sense of being has been beaten down by a disability, and then find themselves again is an incredible feeling," said Brian Byrd, Volunteers of America's Red River Employment vice president, who founded the program in 1994.

Red River Employment became part of Volunteers of America in 2003. Since its founding it has served more than 5,000 people. Currently the program serves more than 600 people and has 35 employees.

"We help people with disabilities to take control of their lives and become productive members of our community," said Byrd. "Disability knows no zip codes, race or status. It should not be the end, only a new beginning."

"As a faith-based organization, we look at all aspects of a person's life—their physical, social and emotional health," Meehan said.



Karl Hasten is a freelance writer in Benton, La.

WHEN YOU GIVE BACK TO YOUR COMMUNITY...



WE MAKE SURE YOU SEE A RETURN ON YOUR INVESTMENT.

Leave a lasting legacy to the programs that are working
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Leveling the Playing Field

*A Chance
To Succeed*



Sister Carol Quinn, a family educator with Volunteers of America, works with Belshiba and Naomie Bouwahr.

By Denise Tucker • Photography by Jackie Jockheck

Programs targeted to help young families overcome obstacles to building safe, secure and successful lives are a major focus of Volunteers of America in the Dakotas.



Dekontee Youwar, 33, a native of Liberia, has spent much of her life struggling to survive.

During her journey on two continents she learned how to overcome poverty, and escape war. Throughout the difficult times, she kept working to achieve her goal of finding an opportunity for a better life for herself and her children in the United States.

Youwar's chance to succeed came in September 2003 when she received refugee status, moved to South Dakota, and became part of the Volunteers of America Even Start program. As soon as Youwar arrived in Sioux Falls, S.D., her life began to get better.

Youwar only had a brief opportunity to go to school in Liberia. Being poor prevented her from starting her education until she was 13 years old, and even then she was only able to complete the third grade. The Volunteers of America Even Start program is giving Youwar and her children the opportunity to continue their education and learn the skills to manage their lives.

"I had trouble reading; I couldn't even read my mail. Volunteers of America immediately started changing that by teaching me to read. The Even Start program is very important. It's good to me. Having someone helping me to read is helping my kids too. Now when my children need help reading a book, I can help them," Youwar said.

Sister Carol Quinn, a family educator with Volunteers of America's Even Start, has worked with Youwar and her daughters for more than a year. Quinn visits their apartment twice a week and is teaching Youwar how to read and equipping her with skills to help her better manage her household—skills that include paying bills, shopping for healthy foods, child care and parenting.



Dekontee Youwar poses with members of her family in Liberia.



Youwar holds her daughter Sharon Koffi.



Sharon, Belshibe and Naomie are very happy to be part of the Volunteers of America Even Start program.

"She is a good student," Quinn said of Youwar.

Currently working as a motel housekeeper, one of Youwar's goals is to get a better job, and she believes that by getting more education and help from Volunteers of America, she will be able to achieve that goal.

Youwar's grandmother, Rebecca Bouwahr, lives with the family and helps care for Youwar's daughter's 8-year-old Belshibe Bouwahr, 5-year-old Naomie Bouwahr, and 19-month-old Sharon Koffi.

"Even Start is a family literacy program designed to break the cycles of poverty and illiteracy," said Sheryl Barnett, vice president of Volunteers of America in the Dakotas. Parents with both an educational need and a child 8 years old or younger can qualify for the program, she said. The Volunteers of America program serves people who are most in need, based on economics, homelessness, lower educational levels, disabilities, and mental health issues, Barnett said.

"The beauty of the Even Start program is that it recognizes that parents who cannot read, haven't finished high school or are not self-sufficient have a difficult time supporting their children's literacy and educational success," she said.

"The Volunteers of America program is comprehensive and collaborative to maximize community resources. The school district is our partner, and we work with a large number of other agencies to obtain referrals to meet the multiple needs of each family," Barnett said.

Volunteers of America received its first Even Start grant in 1992. Each year about 100 families participate in the program.

"States are allocated dollars from the U.S. Department of Education, and local school districts or agencies apply to state departments of



education for funding. Grants vary from about \$100,000 to \$400,000,” she said. Volunteers of America provides 50 percent in matching funds for its Even Start program.

The cost per family here in the Dakotas ranges from about \$3,700 to \$6,000 depending on family needs, intensity and the number of children, Barnett said.

Deb Rice, Even Start program manager, said the program is designed to help the entire family. “Our goal is to provide learning opportunities and teach families how to pass the love of learning down to their children by providing good educational experiences.” Volunteers of America’s programs in the Dakotas also include day care for young children and after-school care.

Juanita Gray’s 8-year-old daughter Shatia participates in Volunteers of America’s Kids Campus program, which provides safe affordable after school care and homework help.

“When I started working, I was checking the area for different day care programs, and I called Volunteers of America. I love their program, it was only two blocks away. And they help Shatia with her homework. She is getting A’s and B’s now in school,” Gray said.

“I like being with my friends and learning at the same time,” Shatia said.

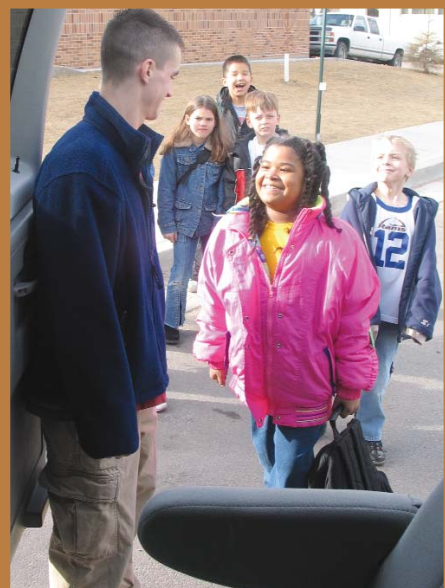
“Sometimes I like to do poems or make up funny stories when I write in my journal. I’m working on a story called ‘If Cats Were in Space.’”

Kids Campus serves up to 27 kids and is located in the Bowden Youth Center, one of six Volunteers of America child care centers in Sioux Falls, S. D. that provides child care for working parents.

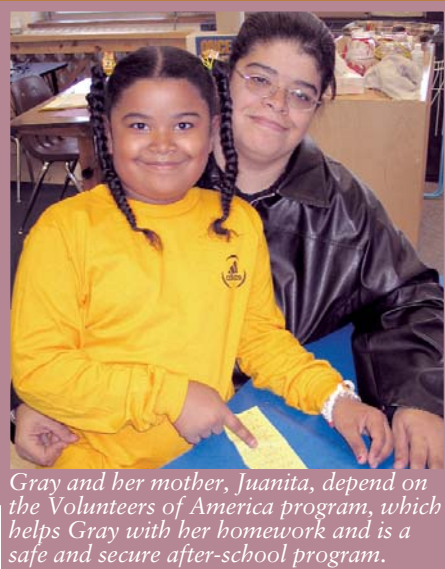
The after-school learning program is for children 8 to 12 years old and allows time for one-on-one attention to the needs of the children. “We



Dylan Thompson enjoys the activities center at the after-school program.



Shatia Gray is pleased to be arriving at the Volunteers of America Kids Campus program.



Gray and her mother, Juanita, depend on the Volunteers of America program, which helps Gray with her homework and is a safe and secure after-school program.

work with the kids on homework, social skills and prevention education,” Terese Schulte, Volunteers of America coordinator, said. “We also are in contact with parents and school counselors on a regular basis,” she said.

The Volunteers of America program emphasizes the importance of not smoking or drinking, never using drugs, not telling lies and staying away from strangers.

“Kids Campus provides a safe place for older children,” Schulte said. “It’s a place for kids to be after school, since that is the riskiest time to get in trouble. Volunteers of America is providing them a safe environment to come to in the summer and after school. And we are helping them with their educational needs,” she said.

“We work very hard to help the kids improve their grades and school assignments. We track their grades and school test scores and the results are sent to the South Dakota Department of Education. Five-year state grants for low-income families who can’t afford tutoring helps cover the costs for Kids Campus,” Schulte said.

Kids Campus also includes an exercise program and other activities in the gym or game room. If it weren’t for the program, most of the kids in the program would be at home alone until a parent got home from work, Schulte said.

The program is open after school Monday through Friday during the school year. A summer program is open all-day during the week. A reduced fee is offered for low-income families.

Denise Tucker is a reporter with the Argus Leader newspaper in Sioux Falls, S.D.

Meeting the Challenge of Affordable Housing

By Carl Ericson ■ Photography by Paul Jeremias and William Thach

Volunteers of America is moving aggressively to help combat the nation's affordable housing crisis by building new and preserving existing properties. Affordable low-income housing efforts focus on people with a wide range of disabilities, seniors and the elderly, and families. Below are four examples of the diverse cross section of Americans who are benefiting from the Volunteers of America national affordable housing program.

Building Fred Lofton's Ark

Fred Lofton didn't build his own ark for old age, but for many years he helped build homes for people in the Denver metropolitan area.

When it came time for him to retire on a limited income, Lofton discovered his ark, Montbello Manor, had been built by Volunteers of America in one of the neighborhoods where he worked as a bricklayer.

"It's a nice feeling to be living here and be a part of this community that I helped build, Lofton said.

Lofton, 79, is one of more than 21,000 people who have found a home in the more than 250 Volunteers of America affordable housing communities in 31 states.

"Volunteers of America has become a leader in working to develop solutions to the housing crisis, both as one of the largest suppliers of affordable housing in the country, but also as a major voice bringing the crisis to the attention of the American public and policymakers in the nation's capital and in state capitals," said Charles Gould, national president of Volunteers of America.

The challenge is not only to build new housing, but to join with other organizations and communities to

preserve existing affordable housing, Gould said.

"The shortage of affordable housing is not a problem limited to the major cities, nor to just those areas along the coasts of the United States," said Lee Felgar, housing director of Volunteers of America in Texas. "We are seeing a severe shortage of affordable and decent housing in all areas of the country. What complicates this situation further is the overall decline in the quality and condition of the nation's housing stock."

For more than three decades Volunteers of America has been at the forefront of combating the nation's growing housing crisis by providing quality affordable housing to seniors, families and people with



Fred Lofton has found a home in the community he helped build.

a wide range of physical and mental disabilities, said Gould.

"We are like a family here" at Volunteers of America's Montbello Manor, said Lofton. "I feel it's a safe, happy and unique place."

Overcoming Disabilities

Volunteers of America's Life House in Asheville, N.C., is a residential facility that serves people with spinal injuries and multiple sclerosis.

"I was seriously injured in a car accident in 1999 and confined to a wheelchair. I lived with my parents, but they were getting older, and I wanted to be more independent. So when I heard that Volunteers of America was building a residential facility, I was excited," Eric Savage said.

In 2003, Life House opened and Savage had his opportunity to make his dream of a more independent life come true.

"Volunteers of America's Life House has made a big difference in my life and the life of the other residents. It gives us all more freedom and independence. It means I can be on my own," Savage said.

Since moving into Life House, Savage has demonstrated many of his abilities by assuming a leadership role. He is president of the resident council and is active in planning events, activities and generating



program ideas. He also encourages other residents.

"I'm really good on my computer searching the Internet and finding information. I helped organize the residents here so that we help each other and encourage each other. The rehab program is real important to helping us all know what we can do and be able to do it. We're all in the same situation, and we can help each other. It's good for us all," Savage said.

Eric Savage surfs the Internet for materials and ideas that might enhance the programs and services at Life House.

Savage is president of the Life House resident council, which meets regularly to discuss how residents can help each other and take advantage of new ideas, programs and services.





“Volunteer of America is wonderful. I’m very grateful. Life House is a great asset to all of us. This is a wonderful complex,” Savage said.

Across the country, Volunteers of America provides housing for people with disabilities. In Colorado, Anthony Mele, 56, lives in Volunteers of America’s Sunset Towers in Denver. Mele has multiple sclerosis and has lived at Sunset Towers since 1991.

“I was living in a small mountain town when I went from slalom skiing to a wheelchair in what seemed like a few months. I was able to work the first few years I was here. I’m lucky to have been able to keep my independence by living here,” Mele said.

Gracie, a 9-year-old cockatoo likes to socialize with the residents at Life House and sit on the shoulder of her owner, Richard Williams.

Helping Homeless Families

When Mary Green*, lost custody of her daughter and was living on the streets, she couldn’t imagine how she was going to straighten out her life. She had a number of obstacles she needed to overcome. Substance abuse, anger management, poor impulse control and unemployment were all issues contributing to her inability to organize her life.

Her success story starts two years ago when Green, 28, made a decision that changed her life. She joined the Volunteers of America’s supportive housing program in New Orleans, and began working hard to overcome the problems that were plaguing her life.

Today Green is employed as a medical technician, attends Holy Cross college, where she is pursuing a degree in nursing, and is caring for

her 6-year-old daughter and her 2-year-old niece.

Green attributes her success to the help and guidance she gets from the Volunteers of America program.

“Volunteers of America is very important to me. I don’t know where I would be at this point in my life. I am blessed to have been able to become part of the Volunteers of America program. It is helping me become a productive person,” Green said.

“My goals are to continue to grow as a person, become self-sufficient, provide for my kids, obtain my degree in nursing and start my career as a nurse,” Green said.

“Mary has worked hard to overcome personal issues that were preventing her from functioning. Her determination to be successful was inspiring. She wanted to be a good mother, get and hold a meaningful

job and go to school. She is an amazing young woman and continues to make tremendous progress toward her goals,” said Antoine Thompson, case manager for the Volunteers of America of Greater New Orleans mental health services program.

James LeBlanc, president of Volunteers of America of Greater New Orleans, said, “The supportive housing program and the services it provides give families and individuals the opportunity for a chance for a new and better life. The program gave Mary that chance and she is succeeding. It’s inspiring to see families who were lost rebuilding their lives and the lives of their family. The Volunteers of America affordable and supportive housing program is all about helping to create safe loving families.”

**Name has been changed*

A Safe Secure Home for the Elderly

Beatrice Barnett turned 90 on May 5, 2005, and is one of the original residents of Volunteers of America Sunset Towers Apartments in Denver.

“This has been a good move for me. I found out about this place from a friend at church when I was getting ready to retire.

“Management here is very good. It is neat, clean and safe. I don’t have any complaints,” she said, laughing.

For more than a decade, Lois Olson, 81, and Walter Laws, 75, have been helping and caring for

each other. Often they would go to the park for a picnic and help each other do the cooking and laundry. Their smiles and helping hands are a fixture at Sunset Towers.

Until last year, Laws worked part time as a security guard in downtown Denver, but when Olson had some health problems, he stopped working and decided to spend more time caring for her.

“Lois and Walter are wonderful people, it’s heart warming to see them together. They help each other and have a loving relationship,” said Barbara Fry, resident manager of Sunset Towers.

Although these stories show that Volunteers of America is making progress in providing more affordable housing to seniors, people with disabilities and families, much remains to be done, said Volunteers of America National President Charles Gould.

The nation’s affordable housing crisis is one that needs to be addressed immediately to meet the needs of the growing number of Americans who cannot afford decent housing—or any housing in many cases, Gould said.



Freelance writer Robbie Snow of Falls Church, Va., contributed to this article.



Lois Olson, William Valdez and Walter Laws (l to r) share some conversation and a happy moment during lunch at Sunset Towers.

A M E R I C A N ★ S P I R I T

MAKING A MIRACLE HAPPEN FOR RUSSIAN ORPHANS

Bill and Gina Ackerman were planning to adopt two children—Irina and Masha—from a Russian orphanage in 2000. In a pre-adoption visit to the orphanage, Masha took Gina Ackerman's hand and led her to a young boy named Yuri and said, "Mama brother."

The Ackermans opened their hearts even wider, changed their plans and proceeded to adopt the three siblings. As soon as the children learned more English they revealed some stunning information. They had another brother in a Russian orphanage.

The couple took immediate action to find Aloysha, as well as a way to unite him with his sisters and brother. They turned to their church for support and to Volunteers of America of Pennsylvania for help with the logistics of the adoption.

"We knew it would be difficult, but we wanted the children to be together. Volunteers of America helped make a miracle happen in our lives and the lives of Irina, Masha, Yuri and Aloysha. It was a great challenge, but we believe that we were being led on a great adventure by God," Gina Ackerman said.

Several months later, with some very generous financial support that included an anonymous donation of \$15,000, Aloysha was on his way to the United States. When he arrived in America, he underwent several surgeries to correct a cleft palate and to save his hearing. Today, Aloysha is playing soccer, going to school and receiving speech therapy.

The amazing story of the four Russian orphans, and the interaction between Gina and Bill Ackerman and Volunteers of America, was the catalyst that led to the creation of the Volunteers of America International Adoption Program in Pennsylvania in partnership with the Adoption Resource Center.

Since 2003, Volunteers of America has helped loving families like the

Ackermans adopt more than 20 Russian children. The adoption program also has helped children from China, Korea, Guatemala, the Ukraine and several other Eastern European countries.

"Each child brings a powerful and compelling story of love and hope,"

said Bill Jones, Volunteers of America vice president in Pennsylvania.

"Aloysha was the first child we helped and now the Ackermans are among the strongest advocates and supporters of Volunteers of America," Jones said.

Bill Ackerman, vice president at Cornell Storefront Systems, has engaged his fellow employees to support Volunteers of America with donations of time and resources.

The Ackermans said they are anxious to help Volunteers of America expand the program so more children can be adopted.



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 2 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.





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