

John Paradis: The benefits of serving America

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By JOHN PARADIS

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NORTHAMPTON — My new year's resolution is to smile more, to be more positive and to focus on the good things in life.

I was reminded of the importance of smiling by a new friend, Leida Cartagena, vice president of workforce development for the New England Farm Workers' Council, who, in her position with the Springfield-based agency, also oversees Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA — citizens working with nonprofits through the AmeriCorps program.

The first thing you notice when you meet Leida is her smile and her enthusiasm. Leida and I are working together on a Martin Luther King Jr. National Day of Service at the Veterans Affairs medical center in Leeds to help veterans with employment skills. When Leida approached the VA with an invitation to help us improve the lives of veterans, our first response was, "help us help veterans get jobs." Leida's answer: We can do this.

On Jan. 22, her VISTA volunteers will be leading workshops in writing cover letters and resumes, interview skills and doing online job searches. This will be the first step in what we believe will be a long-term collaborative and community effort to combat high unemployment among veterans.

In a time in our nation when people are corrosively cynical about politics, politicians and government service, Leida leads a group of volunteers who are passionate about and committed to helping others. From coordination of youth services to building community gardens, her volunteers eagerly seek chances to serve. And they do it with a smile.

Across the country, young people and seniors alike are part of an organized strategy to give something back to their communities. Today, AmeriCorps — under the federal Corporation for National and Community Service — is our domestic Peace Corps. Unfortunately, the VISTA program flies under the radar for most Americans, but it shouldn't.

Two-thirds of its funding passes through governors to grassroots community groups; the rest goes to traditional nonprofits. Volunteers spend a year living and working wherever they're needed. In short, they fulfill President Kennedy's vision of a national service corps to "help provide urgently needed services in urban and rural poverty areas." And, at the end of their service, they receive a stipend to help pay off student loans or for graduate or post-graduate education.

Volunteers come from different walks of life and their ages span decades, but are united in the conviction that Americans must give more of themselves to help solve the nation's problems. Crafted with the help of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, who was as committed to the ideal of national service as his brothers had been three decades ago, AmeriCorps was created under the Clinton Administration

with bipartisan support. It has been around for just under 10 years but has more than 540,000 graduates.

In the 1930s, thousands joined the Civilian Conservation Corps, undertaking scores of needed projects while trading their adverse circumstances for a broader experience of the country's needs and promise. The compelling need to wage World War II reinforced the belief that common sacrifice for the common good is an incident of citizenship. It was this spirit which led many to join the Peace Corps — a governmental call to action — or to respond to the moral call of the civil rights movement. In the process, their vision of America and the world became less parochial and more compassionate.

I doubt that many of us are nostalgic for the Great Depression, global warfare or the military draft. But one need not wish to reprise history to notice what has been lost to America's young people — a common experience, a chance to serve, which cuts across the barriers of race, class and education. This is why national community service and AmeriCorps VISTA is so important.

"It's a national program, but it's local work," said Cartagena, a Holyoke native who returned to the Paper City after college to make a difference. A social worker with degrees from Mount Holyoke College and Boston College, she is an AmeriCorps alum herself. "We are helping take youth off the streets, keeping them in school and getting them jobs. We are also helping mature adults get back into the workforce. In return, employers get skilled workers."

Cartagena said VISTA is always recruiting volunteers who, like her, believe that all Americans, whatever their race, ethnicity or income, have a responsibility to contribute to the common good. "In a time when the feeling of community has slowly disappeared, we are creating opportunities for service with a notion that things that weren't possible are possible by working together," she said.

I hope AmeriCorps VISTA gets more visibility as a continuing call to service, a call that transcends politics and offers Americans from all walks of life a focus for energy, optimism and idealism. It's an important step in keeping alive something of universal value: the chance for people to make their best contribution to a stronger country and a better society.

And that's something to smile about.

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