

What I Didn't Know Then

By Kelli Covey

. . . it's all right to be ridiculous and sway first to the left, then to the right, in order to find our balance.

—Stephen Dunn, from “The Snowmass Cycle”

In 2009, with the strong support of President Barack Obama, Congress passed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act to significantly expand national service and volunteerism nationwide. The intended goal was to mobilize recent college graduates and hundreds of thousands of community members to “make service a solution” to a multitude of public problems, including widespread poverty, homelessness, increased unemployment, and the growing need for education reform. National service has a long history in the United States, and every recent President has made a mark on it—from Kennedy’s Peace Corps to George H. W. Bush’s “thousand points of light” to Clinton’s AmeriCorps program. But this effort was one of the most ambitious, designed to expand a corps of 75,000 national service members to 250,000 over three years.

A year later, national service was under fire, and the new Republican majority in Congress pressed for an end to federal funding of the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), the federal agency that oversees and funds these activities. In the end CNCS was spared, with minor but significant cuts, and advocates stated their intention to fight for full funding in 2012. I share this brief update because the idea of service as a political battleground raises many questions, not the least of which is: What impact does national service have? Is it truly a strategy for change? And if it is, what *kind* of change does it result in?

Here’s the starting point. It’s 1992. I’m 22 years old. I’ve just graduated from college. What I knew then was that I wanted to act and make a difference in the “real” world. What I didn’t know then was that I didn’t know what I didn’t know and that the way to knowing would require the dismantling of the few things I was certain of. When I left school, I did what a lot of young white kids with a liberal arts education and a strong desire to experience the world do—I volunteered for a year. I became a member of Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), then referred to as the “domestic Peace Corps.” VISTA’s mission was to end poverty (wonderful) and provide resources (us!) who would do more than just help—we would *create*. We would empower struggling communities and build an infrastructure that would last long after we left. I was sold.

I took my English degree, my big ideas, and a love of Native American poetry, along with my Protestant upbringing that urged love for one’s neighbor, and headed north. I drove cross-country in late July, leaving behind the scorching heat of my small hometown in Texas, driving through the cornfields of Kansas and Nebraska to the plains of northeastern North Dakota.

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But before I arrived at my site, I had to be trained. In Bismarck, the state capitol, I began a “pre-service orientation” that lasted four or five days. I can’t remember the exact timing because the whole thing was a blur. They were days filled with lectures from *very* positive people; icebreakers that made me cringe; and information on how to write a press release, how to recruit volunteers, and how to work with local government, community organizations, schools, and ever other civic entity under the sun. I was also given a big yellow handbook on how to start a Just Say No club, and trained in creating a drug abuse prevention program for young children. By the end of the week my head was filled with so much how-to that I could hardly think clearly, but I took good notes (like the impeccable student I’d always been) and hoped I was prepared.

Besides all the training, I was alone and away from home for the first time, so I was equally concerned with fitting in and making a few friends, particularly among the other VISTAs who were hanging around the indoor pool at the Holiday Inn Hotel and Suites. My roommate was a runner, musician, and poet from Hinsdale, Illinois. Her friend, who became my friend as well, was Egyptian and Muslim with a strong New Jersey accent. She loved to tell stories about the Jewish boyfriend she was deeply in love with—a relationship that led her traditional mother to disown her. Who knew a tragic story could be so funny? She was loud and hilarious and sad too. I loved her right away.

After the training, my newfound friends stayed in Bismarck to work at their site, and I moved alone to a small town not far from the Canadian border called Devils Lake, a mostly white community of around 7,000 people, made up of bars and churches. It was located near the Devils Lake Sioux Reservation (now the Spirit Lake Reservation), which suffered, unbeknownst to me, from high rates of unemployment, alcoholism, fetal alcohol syndrome, and poverty. Unlike some tribes with casinos and a booming economic infrastructure, the Dakota tribe was struggling. I was given the task of creating a drug abuse prevention program—supported by the Just Say No organization—with the goal of leaving behind a team of leaders and programs that would say no to drugs for generations. Just what they needed, right?

I remember, notably, that when I first crossed the lake that served as the boundary between the town and the reservation, I felt something I couldn’t quite name . . . something that calmed and quieted me. I wanted to call it holy or sacred or sublime—the names I could pull from a stock list of words that meant deep and unexplained meaning. But the feeling wasn’t abstract, or even nameable. All I could think was that the land seemed to be *alive*. Over time, that feeling would recur and grow deeper. It both frightened and exhilarated me. I felt repeatedly drawn to the lake and the reservation, but felt just as strongly that I didn’t belong there. Still, the doubt

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seemed to come from inside me, not from the fields or the frozen lake. So I drove out often, even when I wasn't meeting with anyone, just to be close to whatever it was I couldn't name.

But back to business—here was the plan. There were seven or eight other VISTAs, all regional coordinators across the state. Our job was to identify leaders in the community, organize a training to initiate them as Just Say No club leaders, and then support them as they organized children à la the Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts into regular meetings where the kids would engage in activities, especially role-playing. The role-playing scenarios seemed to be a variation on one particular scenario:

Kid 1: "Hey, you want some drugs?"

Kid 2: "No."

Kid 1, reminding Kid 2 that drugs are cool: "You *sure* you don't want some drugs?"

Kid 2: "No, because I have self-esteem."

If I sound disparaging of the model, I was. Something about it didn't feel right. In fact, it seemed almost diminishing of the kids' experiences. What about their actual *lives*? What about Kid 3, who lives with his grandmother because his parents are alcoholics, whose sister lives somewhere else, and who is made fun of at school because he's Indian? I was skeptical. But I carried on with the work.

I followed the big yellow book and started reaching out. For the first few months I tried to identify leaders in the Native community to be trained. It was a slow process, with many fits and starts. Robert was one of my first real contacts. He ran a community organization, and was generous and kind and knowledgeable about history and conditions. He warned me cryptically about tribal politics, told me not to overstep, encouraged me to get to know people: trust was key. He guided me to a community member named Lila, who ran a daycare center. Lila was lovely, very warm and friendly. She agreed that the community needed help, and when I told her I was organizing a training workshop in one month, she agreed to organize a group of people to attend. "Yes," she nodded, "we need to help the children."

Then there was Grace. She ran the drug abuse prevention program at the tribal headquarters, which featured a health clinic run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and a smattering of small offices throughout—little cubicles with paneled walls—and behind her desk, a dream catcher and a DARE poster. She was in her mid-forties, very quiet, barely acknowledging me when I came in to meet her for the first time. I was nervous. She was unmoving. She listened without affect as I humbly gave her my practiced spiel, and just when I thought she was about to escort me out, she told me there was a community health fair coming up and I could have a table. I was thrilled—progress!

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The day of the fair I arrived early to find no one around. I wandered, wondered, felt awkward. Finally I passed Grace in the hallway and smiled my big smile, and she looked through me like she'd never seen me before. After some initial awkwardness as I reminded her why I was there, she pointed to a folding table and a space in the hall set aside for me. I thanked her, relieved. I laid out all my brochures, a sign-up sheet for the training, and a big bowl of candy, which quickly made me the center of attention for all the children. Other tables were set up, people filtered in, some greeted me tentatively. At the end of the day I had a few names on the sign-up sheet, the same number of brochures, and an empty bowl. I was encouraged, but deflated. Still, Grace had warmed to me, watched out for me, even cracked a hesitant smile or two in my direction. I felt a connection to her that seemed worlds away from my early morning invisibility. This, I thought, is what it feels like to act gradually, to build trust.

Grace also agreed to attend the training and bring along a couple of people. The few names on my sign-in sheet said they would come too. By then Lila had a list of six, possibly growing to eight. I scheduled the training for November, almost four months into my service. The training was significant because the Just Say No organization had to fly in a trainer from Minneapolis. Because of the expense, at least fifteen people had to sign up, and each VISTA member had one training workshop for the year. I had one shot to get the program started.

Every day leading up to the big day, I drove out to the reservation to confirm that people were coming. Grace assured me yes and Lila was enthusiastic. Days before, a few people began to drop out (this is expected, I told myself). I still had twelve attendees, and given the newness of the program, the Just Say No organization considered it a success. They were proud of me. I was proud of me too.

The day of the training arrived. The trainer, Judy, flew in the night before and was at the site early to set up. Judy was a white woman in her early forties and also the person who had trained me. She was very, *very* nice. She was also very positive. I had always had issues with positive people because they made me feel negative and because, truth be told, I thought something must be wrong with them. Still, I knew Judy was smart and capable and I'd seen her handle resistance (mine!) without pause. I respected her. She seemed to have a good sense of how things can go awry and how to adjust, so my confidence was building. By 9:00 a.m., breakfast was laid out and my materials were in order, all shadowed by piles of the big yellow handbook. By 10:00 a.m., no one had arrived. I made some calls, asked around the building—*have you seen so and so?* By noon, I decided to follow suggestions from Judy. I made more calls, took a side trip. Still nothing. By 2:00 p.m., Judy was looking at me like I was a screw-up, and I was thinking so too. By 3:00 p.m., not a single person had shown up and Judy was on her way back to Minnesota. I was devastated.

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The next day I was back at the reservation—disappointed and barely pushing down my anger. I wanted answers. On the sidewalk near the tribal community center, I saw Lila approaching. I half expected her to avoid me, to look sorry or ashamed, but she greeted me warmly like nothing had happened. I was confused, but controlled. After exchanging our usual greetings, I finally asked, “So what happened yesterday?” She didn’t know what I meant. I said, “The training, it was yesterday but no one came.” The light came on. “Ohhh yes . . . the training,” she said. “Well, I couldn’t make it.” And that was that. She offered no explanation, no apologies, and suddenly I went from angry to stunned. I put on a brave face and said okay, and she was still smiling at me as we walked away, promising to stay in touch. Later, Robert told me that on the day before my big day, Lila had unexpectedly taken in her tenth foster child. Despite our months of conversation, I didn’t even know that she had one foster child, much less ten.

Days later I went in search of Grace and found her office empty, with no sign of when she’d return. I asked a few people where she was and no one seemed to know, or at least no one was saying. It all seemed strange. I hung around and asked some more, before finally one woman said to me in a low whisper, “*She’s on a bender.*” I nodded, listening and pretending not to be dumbstruck and horrified, both of which I was. I asked if she was coming back. She shrugged, “*We don’t know, maybe.*” I never saw Grace again, and as far as I know she never came back. The whole time I was there, no one ever replaced her. This could sound like a failure of character or of community. But even then, with all I didn’t know, I sensed it was something more, some kind of abandonment, something larger that I couldn’t begin to wrap my head around. I drove home across the lake thinking to myself, *mercy.*

Later, at the agency where I had office space and knew everyone, Larry, a Dakota who ran a support center on the reservation, approached me after a staff meeting. Larry had been around a long time, the picture of consistency and respect. He didn’t say much because he didn’t have to, so I was surprised to be addressed by him. Apparently, word had gotten around about my dismal failure, and he came up, quietly as always, to tell me I was doing a good job. I was dismayed that he knew, and also certain he was only feeling sorry for me. But he shrugged off my protests. “The change you’re trying to make in a year,” he said soberly, “takes seven years here.” Then he told me a story about one time and one change and how it had been a long time coming. And the weight in my chest was awe that he was so patient and unbroken. And I was not.

As my insight grew, the Just Say No organization became the target of my frustration. I started saying no a lot . . . at the quarterly meetings with the other VISTAs and the state director of Just Say No (my boss), where we were supposed to address issues and report on our success. They wanted to see progress. I wanted them to understand the situation, to shift their expectations.

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"This model doesn't apply, or at least it needs to be adjusted. You're asking me to do something that doesn't take into account peoples' lives or the conditions they face or how long it really takes to make a change here." They thought I was making excuses, being negative, letting normal barriers get the best of me. I was torn about myself, but about the model? No. It wasn't working. I knew it. But I didn't know how to change it.

Watching the other VISTAs was also instructive. I began to notice something about the two people who were having the most success. One was a fortyish woman named Tammy, who had become unemployed and joined VISTA as a way to get back on her feet. She grew up in the community she was working in, attended church regularly, knew everyone, and was recruiting volunteers and organizing clubs and events like a madwoman. On the Native end of the spectrum, Raye was in her twenties with a wicked sense of humor and a bellowing laugh. She was full-blood Chippewa, organizing on the Turtle Mountain Reservation, her birthplace. Like Tammy, she seemed to know everyone in her community and had all kinds of activities to report. But she didn't call them Just Say No clubs, and they weren't even really clubs like the big yellow book said. When the Just Say No people pushed her to brand her work, she would laugh and make a joke and seem joyfully unbothered. I wanted to ask her advice, but I was also nervous that I'd seem foolish. When I finally got my nerve up, she was straightforward: *"The Chippewa are not the Dakota and the Dakota are not the Chippewa."* Touché.

While fighting the good fight, I was also in the midst of a fairly standard identity crisis. I began to realize that my whole sense of self had been formed around rejecting my family and my hometown and everything I'd left behind—partly because kids my age do that, and partly because I was gay and a year away from knowing it. I knew who I wasn't, but not who I was. It didn't seem like enough.

I had a boyfriend two years younger who was in Vienna for a year abroad and wrote me sweet letters about how much he missed me, and I imagined I missed him too and wrote him back. I ate a lot of frozen Tombstone pizzas and macaroni and cheese, and watched romantic comedies (awful) that I rented from the local grocery store and played on the massive portable VCR I dragged home from the office on the weekends. I made friends with my coworkers in the agency where I was placed. I read, I wrote, and I read some more. I fell in love with Ellen Olenska in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*. I absorbed James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and wondered what the hell it meant for me. I puzzled over Pearl Buck's autobiography about her missionary life in China, wondering about her assumptions as I did about my own—*what the hell did she know?*

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I took nightly walks in the cemetery beside my apartment, listening to Simon and Garfunkel's greatest hits, tagging "The Boxer" as my mantra. I learned about durum wheat and rode a combine. I learned to drive on ice by doing donuts in the Wal-mart parking lot, and I learned to keep a survival kit in my trunk to prepare for a whiteout (it happened!) and adjusted to living inside the deepest cold I've ever known. I coached two girls' basketball teams, all eight- and nine-year-olds. A lay-up I could teach, so I wasn't a total loss. But still, I kept wondering about the one Native girl, my best player, who lived with a loving grandmother but was sometimes left without a ride home after practice. *What about that?* When spring came, I stood in awe before my first field full of sunflowers.

Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety.

—James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*

I also talked to my twin sister on the phone many times a day—my lifeline and hers. She was in western New York doing VISTA too. Notoriously reserved and cynical, she was suddenly in charge of setting up hot dog stands in front of Family Dollar, organizing bowling tournaments, and fundraising from small businesses for an end-of-year race. She'd made only two friends, both coworkers. One was an older single woman who was needy and socially awkward and who lived with her aging father. The other was a lovely wise woman in her late thirties who was on work release—each night she left her job to return to the women's prison nearby. Both broke her heart in different ways. She hated the whole thing.

We studied and took the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and applied to graduate schools all across the country. In truth, we were running like hell back to school, craving teachers and knowledge and most of all certainty and answers instead of all these endless questions. Academia awaited me, I thought.

I also held a secret about the Native history in my own family, something of which I had once been proud. My maternal grandparents were born in Indian territory in Oklahoma, an area that later became the town of Claremore. Growing up, we learned about the forced march called the Trail of Tears, when Cherokees were removed from their homelands in the southeastern U.S. to desolate land in Indian Territory (later the state of Oklahoma), many dying along the way. In the later years of his life, my grandfather called his family "the tribe," studied the Cherokee language on cassette tapes while smoking from a treasured pipe, and entered every doorway with the Cherokee word *Tahigwa*, which I think means "at peace." My mother took us on a summer trip to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the seat of the Cherokee nation, to learn about Sequoyah, the creator of the Cherokee writing system, and to see the "Indian Village" in the

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visitor center. She also traveled to the capitol in Austin, Texas, birth certificates of all five children in tow, and then back to Tahlequah to get us on the tribal rolls and ensure that our heritage was recognized. During my senior year of college we all finally received our notice of tribal membership, along with a small blue card from the Bureau of Indian Affairs confirming that our Indian blood quantum level was 3/32. I was official. But in North Dakota, the very existence of that documentation was a source of shame. I heard that lots of white people “claim” to be Cherokee or some other intermarrying tribe. I never once mentioned it to anyone. I was a fraud, and I knew it. And by that point, I felt the same way about the whole VISTA enterprise.

“So let’s get this straight,” I would say to myself. “I am a twenty-two-year old white kid from a small town in Texas that is steeped in an untold history of racism and features the “Indians” as the school mascot. I have no real skills except reading and thinking. I have never had a drink or smoked or done a drug in my whole life. And now I’m coming to a reservation 1,500 miles away that has problems I don’t know the first thing about to help Native people change their lives in ONE YEAR? Who was I kidding? And the ones who accepted and sent me—who were *they* kidding? The whole thing felt like a sham and I an utter failure.

Later, after a full year there, we finally had a meeting. It was with Larry’s group, at the support center, and it wasn’t kids who were the designated ages of eight to thirteen but instead whole families—babies and teenagers—and lots of food. I don’t remember us ever talking about drug prevention, but I do remember that it was a good time and people were happy to be together, and I remember the two-year-old I found in the pantry completely covered in coffee he’d dug out from a commercial bin, and I remember stumbling on the stairs and one young boy yelling, “Hey, are you *drunk*?” and all the other kids, most under ten, falling over in peals of laughter, as I swallowed my discomfort.

It was summer again when I left North Dakota. I drove away with a lifelong friend I would cherish, after a great going-away party, and with a feeling of disillusionment that echoed through me for years. What I thought I knew by the end was that who I was mattered at least as much as what I did, that the only change is in relationship, and that the lake was *meant* to be a mystery.

Twenty years later I now facilitate a discussion series with a group of national service members, all tutors and mentors in Chicago schools. We use short pieces of literature to spur their thinking and help them talk about their experiences, their motivations, the impact they can and cannot have, and maybe most importantly, how their year or two of service might affect their

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future involvement in public life. Sometimes they resist thinking and talking. They want action, not reflection. They want answers, not more questions. I empathize.

While I remain a staunch supporter of national service, I also know it raises as many questions as it answers—ones we are duty bound to explore. As to the question of what kind of change it makes, I suspect that, like much service, the greatest change occurs in the people who serve, *not* in the communities where they offer themselves. While that kind of change may not be the end we hope for (what about ending poverty?), or even sufficient, it might still be true. And even necessary.