I Was a Spear Carrier in the War on Poverty

When I tell people that in the late sixties I was a VISTA Volunteer on Manhattan's Lower East Side, I sometimes sense in them a certain reverential awe, as though I were a veteran of the good war. This I greatly enjoy. But the impression is not entirely accurate.

Though a member of the generation that came of age during the sixties, I was never really of it. The turmoil I experienced during my college years was largely personal, and unlikely as it now sounds, both the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war were like a commotion in a room down the hall. The closest I came in those college years to a political act was joining the Young Republicans.

This was mainly to help a friend who needed votes for an opposition slate, but it was not out of character either. One of my first enduring political memories was through my grandfather pulled me aside at a family gathering to dispense a bit of advice. He had suffered through a dozen ulcerous years of Roosevelt and he was not about to let his grandson go down that ideological drain. “Jonny,” he admonished me, apropos of nothing, “I want you to remember one thing. YOU CAN'T PRIME THE PUMP.” My formative political reading consisted of such fare as Barry Goldwater’s Conscience of a Conservative, Herbert W. Philbrick’s I Led Three Lives, and Harry and Bonaro Overstreet’s What We Must Know About Communism. Were he still around when I finished high school, my grandfather would have been proud of my long senior paper on John Maynard Keynes, in which I concluded that a government that manipulated the economy was a menace to our freedom.

College didn’t really alter any of these beliefs. But somehow in my mind, conservatism had always been connected to the idea of service; if the government wasn’t supposed to do very much, then wasn’t it all the more important that individuals pick up the slack? I didn’t see how you could fob off humanity’s well-being onto automatic cosmic processes, the way communists do with their historical dialectic and capitalists do with their invisible hand. This was the Boy Scout Manual view of individual good deeds rather than a yen for what was called, at the time, “social change.”

During the summer after my junior year, I worked on a house painting and tutoring project in the black Boston ghetto of Roxbury. At the end of my senior year, the “future” suddenly looming before me like a cantankerous creditor, and the draft beginning to loom up as well, I found a VISTA application outside my college dining hall. Actually, it was the Peace Corps that had captured my imagination. But the Peace Corps application was long and complicated, and they seemed to want skills like animal husbandry that were not my strong suit. The VISTA application was much simpler. I felt some trepidation, nevertheless, submitting my meager credentials before those high people in Washington. A few days later they called, person to person, and asked if I could start training in June.

These events, and those that followed, have

By Jonathan Rowe
been on my mind during the last four years. President Reagan might have been expected to embrace VISTA's volunteer spirit: the way it tries to help communities help themselves, the patriotism that is implicit in taking time out to help your country. He might have seen what a bargain the government and the country get when they tap the enthusiasm of young (and old and middle-aged) people for, at present, $7,800 a year, all costs included. But Reagan first tried to eliminate the program, and when Congress wouldn't let him, his underlings set out to run it into the ground. Key positions have gone unfilled for months, even years. There has been absolutely no national recruiting of the kind that made it possible for me to pick up an application outside my college dining hall. They even removed VISTA from the stationery of Action, the agency of which VISTA is a part.

For people like Thomas Pauken, Reagan's Action director, VISTA is a symbol: social "activism," the antiwar protests, Hayden and Fonda, the works. Indeed, VISTA did arise as part of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. It has tended to attract volunteers of other than Reaganite persuasion, largely because they seem less interested than Reaganites in making money. VISTA volunteers have found that to improve the lot of people low on the ladder, they sometimes have had to do what the realtors, gun-owners, and cigarette companies do, which is to try to bring some pressure to bear upon elected officials.

More specifically, the Reaganites have objected to the way Sam Brown, who was Carter's Action head, dispensed large VISTA grants to groups with nationwide organizing agendas, like Associated Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). Fair enough. But they have inflated this objection into a caricature of the entire program that bears virtually zero relationship to what I experienced as a VISTA volunteer. The funny part is that I think Ronald Reagan himself would approve of at least part of what I saw and learned. As for the other part, I wish he had been there to see it with me. Pauken too.

Sobering up the white boys

When I set off for Springfield, Massachusetts a few days after graduation for VISTA "training," I felt a little like a Marine recruit headed for Camp Lejeune. It did not turn out quite that way.

I lived with a blind woman—a real live member of the community—who kept getting the mineral oil and the cooking oil confused, and I was assigned to a local storefront action group of the kind that were proliferating at the time. The director of this group, a large man of obvious Mau-Mauing potential, told two other volunteers and me to go register new voters in a housing project that was set off like a dump on the outskirts of town. That was it.

Looking back, I think the primary purpose of this assignment may have been to give the white boys something to do, and perhaps sober them up a bit. Not appreciating such subtleties at the time, I undertook the task with earnest zeal, trooping up and down the stinking stairwells, knocking on doors, trying to cajole people into coming with us to city hall a week or so hence. Innocence is a greatly undervalued asset, and we actually spent an entire day at the end of this canvass ferrying new voters back and forth. The people at the store front seemed no less surprised than those at city hall.

All the while, there were uplifting lectures on poverty by officials from Washington, visits to black churches, and excursions to such places as a migrant labor camp, where we were all duly appalled. What I really needed was advice on walking a ghetto street at 1 a.m. and on attaching a lock to a tenement doorframe that has been reduced to sawdust by holes drilled upon holes.

"I stayed with a blind woman in Springfield, Massachusetts."
(not to mention a little Spanish). The VISTA training program, unfortunately, seemed to have been designed by sociologists, not police patrolmen and locksmiths.

There was no sergeant presiding over this training. Instead, there was a gregarious local social worker we called “Auntie Harriet,” who fed and cheer-led us, and generally represented the acme of Jewish motherhood. Aside from a pregnancy in the ranks, the cause of most concern was the volunteers who complained they were given neither sufficient supervision nor “meaningful” work to do. I ignored most of this and went about registering voters, a response which caused the program psychiatrist to puff thoughtfully on his pipe at the required interview at the end of the training. (“You just, ah, withdrew, is that correct . . .?”) Again, a locksmith would have been more helpful.

From there, I was assigned to something called the Mobilization for Youth, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The gangs, the drugs, the crime—I had no idea how I was going to fight poverty in a place like that. It was pretty scary.

‘There is nothing you can do’

The Lower East Side was the port of entry for the wave of immigrants, especially Eastern European Jews, that flooded the city in the late 19th century. It is a place of legend, captured in the movie, *Hester Street,* and the classic American novel, *Call It Sleep.* Entertainers like George Jessel and Eddie Cantor grew up here; Jacob Riis discovered how the other half lives; institutions like the Henry Street Settlement, the Educational Alliance, and the garment workers union defined a whole era of American idealism. Garment district tycoons with homes in Scarsdale or on Long Island started as pushcart peddlers on these same streets.

As these original occupants—many of them at least—moved out, and new immigrants from the Caribbean and the South moved in, the neighborhood began to unravel. In the old days nobody locked his door, even though the Lower East Side was the most crowded area in the world, and neighbors visited from one tenement floor to the next. Now there were still enclaves of stability. But the ubiquitous metal grates across windows and storefronts gave the dark streets the feeling of a city under siege.

That summer, 1967, was like the autumn ripeness before the final decline. Owing largely to the controlled rents—apartments could be had for $37.50 a month—the Lower East Side had become Haight-Ashbury East, the Atlantic capital of the Flower Children. Emaciated acid freaks and Hare Krishna chanters peopled the street corners. The processional organ strains of Procol Harem and the Doors somehow blended with the Latin music blaring from the record stores, the black nationalists, store front evangelists and Hasidim. There were front stoop domino games on milk crates, polkas at the Ukrainian social clubs, and bocci at the corner of East Houston and First Street. And always, those window grates and the specter of crime. It was at first terrifying, but then rapturous. My first night there, I went to Katz’s delicatessen and sat next to a man who said he was Art Garfunkel’s uncle. I could barely imagine what wonders must lie ahead.

Life was not so rapturous, of course, for those who were there because they had no choice. It was for these—the Puerto Ricans and blacks, primarily—that the Mobilization for Youth was founded in 1962. MFY’s main focus was job training, including the creation of enterprises, such as a gas station and a luncheonette, to employ the people so trained. But MFY also engaged in direct action against what its organizers saw as the perpetrators of distress in the neighborhood. They organized rent strikes, picketed construction sites over union hiring practices, took on public school principals, and in general made a ruckus not seen on the Lower East Side since the garment workers took on the bosses earlier in the century.

None of this direct action endeared MFY to its targets. At the same time, factions at city hall
thought that the millions MFY was receiving from the federal government should be channeled instead through themselves. In 1964 the Daily News accused the organization of being a “Red honeycomb,” prompting an orgy of investigation that was referred to within MFY simply as “the trouble.” MFY survived, but the place was never the same. It was the prototype, I heard repeatedly, for the federal War on Poverty. But by the time I arrived at 255 East Houston Street, an old catering establishment that had been converted into an MFY center, the organization was approaching middle age.

“Which one of you is from Harvard?” Rita was asking. “Is there someone here from Harvard?” Rita was a sturdy Latin woman, bronze and handsome, who had just emerged from a classroom in PS 82 at the corner of Madison and Grand Streets. I had just reported here with another VISTA volunteer to work with the Neighborhood Youth Corps, a summer job program for teenagers that MFY had contracted to run. As the object of Rita’s question, I was embarrassed and a little confused. Why did she have to bring up Harvard?

She ushered me into the old classroom, where ochre computer cards were stacked up on hingetop desks. Tito, a gangly Puerto Rican youth with one arm, sat at one of the desks, flipping doggedly through a stack. Elsewhere in the room sat one or two others, similarly engaged.

These punch cards, I learned, had spawned a crisis in the Youth Corps program. The crew leaders at the service agencies that served as job sites had filled them out incorrectly, and as a result the entire payroll process had gagged. Checks for the Lower East Side were being sent to Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville, kids had not been paid for weeks, and there had been sit-ins and threats of violence. Harvard was going to help straighten things out.

This was not exactly the sort of work the VISTA posters and forward-looking logo had suggested. But since New York was overwhelming and I had no idea how else to wage war on poverty there, the punch cards were at least a way to keep busy and feel like I was contributing.

I worked under Ron, a canny young black from Harlem who had the gift of ironic detachment from the confusion around him. We sat in the classroom, correcting card upon card, while “Whiter Shades of Pale” came from Tito’s radio on the window sill. There was no shortage of administrators, who seemed to issue forth from the inner sanctums of PS 82 like clowns from the Volkswagen in the old circus trick. What they all did, I never quite grasped. I began to suspect that the Neighborhood Youth Corps was intended to provide summer employment not just for ghetto youth but for high school guidance counselors from Brooklyn as well. There was also, of course, a generous provision for MFY’s administrative expenses.

As best I can recall, neither these administrators nor I got out into the field a great deal to actually see the program. What I did see gave me cause for concern. On the positive side, Youth Corps workers were reading to elderly folks with failing eyesight and doing other things along that line. But there were also “recreational aides” or “community support workers,” who might hang around a playground and perhaps push some kids on the swings. I was less inclined than others of my generation to question authority, but I did feel impelled to call attention to this.

At the end of one typically sweltering afternoon, I approached Irv (not his real name), one of the top administrators, as he was departing in leather portfolio under arm. Irv was a somber man whose hang-dog expression suggested he had processed a few thousand too many forms in the New York City schools. “Errr,” I began, “don’t you think we should get out to the job site more and make sure the kids are doing something useful?”

“Believe me,” Irv intoned, with just a trace of irritation, “there is nothing you can do.”

Disemburdening the camel

VISTA pay was $205 per month, which had to cover rent, food, everything. This amount was not as little as it may seem. My $49.50 per month rent included utilities, and you could get imperfect eggs and cheese at the Essex Street Market at seconds prices. Ninety-five cents would buy a weighty veal cutlet platter at the Ukrainian

The common belief is that legal service offices are hotbeds of ‘activism.’ In reality, Rutgers Street was more of a divorce and welfare mill.
restaurants on Tompkins Square Park, or a plate of lo mein in Chinatown. For considerably less you could get a knoblewurst at Katz's. I thought I was living pretty well.

A greater problem than money was crime. There was an absurd incongruity between my rickety doorframe and the hostile world that this barrier was supposed to protect me against. My window opened out to a fire escape that seemed ominously accessible from the ground. For weeks I lay awake at night concocting medievalish devices for foiling intruders—spikes in the window sill and the like.

In the end, the obvious solution was not to fortify the camel but to disemburden it. I rid myself of everything I might worry about losing and lived in one-and-a-half rooms with only clothes, pots, and plates from a second-hand store on the Bowery, and the old radio on which I listened to Lyndon Johnson announce that he would not seek another term. Poverty is always more pleasant when it is voluntary, but the effect of lightening the load in this fashion was unexpectedly liberating. Since I had little to fear losing, New York became, in a sense, mine. In terms of friendship and experience, it was by far the richest year of my life.

Process server for the people

When the summer was over, I was assigned to one of the MFY legal services offices, the shining stars in the MFY galaxy at the time. The office was the first floor of a tenement at 26 Rutgers Street, at the far bottom of the Lower East Side, near the stanchions of the Brooklyn Bridge. The neighborhood was a living archaeological dig. Around one corner, on East Broadway, sober young Hasidim in black robes and payess (ear curls) lined up at shul. At the other end of the street, across from the public housing projects, blacks and Puerto Ricans lined up for their late afternoon pharmaceutical trade. To the east, on East Broadway, were the Garden Cafeteria, thick with the aromas of pea soup and challah, Noah Zark's kosher pizza, and bodegas. To the west the Chinese were spilling over from Chinatown.

The legal services office reflected this polyglot brew. The head attorney was a former youth worker named Bernie. Under him were a Puerto Rican, a black, and a WASP. There were two social workers: Ping, whose conciliatory style might have driven the confrontation types to distraction, and Nadia, who was indifferent to her beauty, both cherubic and world-wise.

The common belief is that such offices were hot-beds of legal “activism.” In reality, Rutgers Street was more a divorce and welfare mill. Ninety-five percent of the cases, it seemed, had to do with the tenuous ordering of unordered lives. I, for the most part, was a messenger. This wasn’t exactly on the VISTA posters, either. But I could watch trials from the back of courtrooms and traipse around New York, with which I was infatuated. (This often included, not incidentally, traipsing through Chinatown at lunchtime, on the way to the city courts.) Being a messenger often meant being a “process server.” When you start a lawsuit in New York, someone has to deliver a copy of the complaint to the person being sued. This can be interesting work.

I remember one case in which a black woman was divorcing her husband for atrocities I cannot now recall. For some reason the husband, who ran a fish and chips joint not listed in the Michelin guide, had to be served that evening. It was a blustery December night, the streets were desolate, and the scene inside the fish joint was like an Edward Hopper painting racially transposed. Men in Goodwill overcoats and tattered army jackets leaned lank and tired under a fluorescent light, cupping cigarettes in their fingers, waiting for nothing in particular. In the rear, an ox of a man was hacking away at a fish with an enormous cleaver. He was the one I had to inform that his wife was suing for divorce.

I stood across the street, looking through the cracked plate glass, watching the cleaver go up and down, whacking through the fish. I studied the faces for a hint of benevolence. I shivered, and waited; perhaps there would be a fire, or a power outage, or perhaps a rabbi would drop in

Conservatives are wary of VISTA because they see it as a haven for liberals who want to make trouble for society. But I don't see how you could fix the boiler on Henry Street without making trouble for somebody.
for a chat. Finally, no such reprieve in sight, I resigned myself to my fate. I am not brave but dutiful to the core. Holding the blue-covered complaint in front of me like a soldier bearing the cross into the crusades, I entered and walked across the room. The cleaver stopped. Everything stopped. I can still feel those eyes bearing down on me. "This is for you," I forced from my mouth.

He took it, without visible emotion. Then, in a voice that seemed to rumble up from the gravel pits, that sounded like Sonny Terry hung over, "Wha's dis shit?"

Then there was the pianist, a nervous little Jewish man whose wife hated his piano playing so much that she would shut the piano lid on his fingers. He wanted a divorce. But it was a Jiggs and Maggie situation, and he was so terrified of her that he refused to point her out to me in person. This made it difficult for me to serve the complaint. Bernie devised a plan. The pianist and I would secrete ourselves in a broom closet in the senior citizen’s center where Mrs. Pianist spent her afternoons. We would peer through a crack in the door. When Mrs. Pianist passed by, he would give the signal, and I would burst forth and present the notice of the divorce.

I have since suspected that Bernie was having fun with my dutifulness, but I regarded this as a solemn assignment and carried it out accordingly. The only hitch was that at first sight of his wife, Mr. Pianist lost his composure and made a break for the stairs, leaving me standing in the broom closet, its door wide open, for all to see.

With Nadia I often made social work calls, investigating family squabbles and welfare problems and occasionally taking an alcoholic husband to Bellevue or Long Island to dry out. The apartments tended to be similar. A television set along with wall hangings of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King or the pope formed the family shrine. There was vinyl-covered living room furniture and a formica dinette set. Purist that I am, the television sets surprised me. I questioned whether welfare should provide for such things and took a dim view of those who, I thought, wanted to raise the detritus of the consumer culture to a matter of right.

For this reason I was somewhat skeptical of the major lawsuit in our office of the kind that so annoys the Reagan types. We were trying to establish, to some degree, that welfare recipients should have a telephone as a matter of right. When Jefferson and the others drew up the Bill of Rights in Philadelphia, was telephone service in Lower Manhattan really what they had in mind? I didn’t think so. Still, this was my team. One of the hazards of such lawsuits is that plaintiffs have a way of disappearing. This possibility is especially distressing for legal services attorneys, to whom such suits represent a blow not only for social justice but for career advancement as well. Thus there was some anxiety on Rutgers Street when the plaintiff in the telephone case didn’t appear to sign some required papers. I was dispatched to find her.

On the Lower East Side the neighborhood becomes generally worse as you go from Second Avenue on the west towards Avenue D and the river on the east. Our plaintiff, whom I will call Mrs. Martinez, lived on Avenue C, in a tenement indistinguishable from hundreds of others except that it was shabbier. The mailboxes were gouged and pried almost to the point of uselessness, and the entryway was a littered invitation to junkies and whoever else would take refuge in the building's dark recesses.

I knocked at the apartment. Again. And again. Finally there was a barely audible "Quien es [Who's there]?

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"El abogado [the attorney]," I replied—the magic password. She opened the door a crack and then let me in. With her were a sister, or neighbor, and a little boy who seemed to be ill. Mrs. Martinez had not left the apartment for two or three days. The reason, I was told, was the Columbia riots.

The story on the street was that so many policemen had been summoned to deal with the students rioting uptown that patrols on the Lower East Side had diminished. Junkies and muggers were having a field day, and people like Mrs. Martinez were so terrified that they locked their doors for the duration. Lacking a telephone, she was not able to call a doctor, a lawyer, anyone, when her child became ill.

It is still hard for me to swallow the idea of a "right" to a telephone. But it's almost as hard for me to argue that people like Mrs. Martinez don't need one—perhaps not as a right, but as something the rest of us ought, by public policy, to provide. To the lawyers it may be a distinction without a difference. But to me it seems important that we put a little more emphasis on responsibilities and a little less on rights.

One strike against VISTA in the Reaganesque mind is that its volunteers have, on occasion, interfered with the benevolent workings of the private sector. I helped cause such interference. The private sector was in the person of an individual I will call Shepstein.

Shepstein owned two tenement buildings on Henry Street, about two blocks from the office. When one of the tenants came timidly to our office one afternoon, the building had been without heat and hot water for, I believe, more than a week. This was the dead of winter, with temperatures in single digits. Mothers were huddling with their children in front of open ovens at night to keep from freezing, while elderly ladies were burning charcoal in trash barrels. For at least two days there was no running water at all.

In the world of New York landlord-tenant relations, which resemble relations on the Iran-Iraq border, a primary weapon of battle is something called a "7A." Under a 7A tenants can withhold their rents from the landlord and pay them to a trustee, who will use the money to make needed repairs. To start a 7A the tenants must sign a petition. This is where I came in.

When I tell of my VISTA days, the "tenant organizing" is the part I take greatest pleasure in recounting, sounding as it does like service on the front lines. Actually, I pretty much just held the clipboard. At the first apartment I knocked at that cold February evening I was greeted by Mrs. Tomasita Rivera. Tomasita was somewhere in that foggy territory between 22 and 45 that Puerto Rican women enter when they have not much money and a brood of kids. She had a cap on a front tooth and moved with a kind of tomboy swagger. The bloom may have been off the rose, but her puckish humor and spunk were still there. Tomasita Rivera was a tenant organizer's dream.

Despite her imperfect English, Tomasita understood immediately what was afoot and seized hold of it like a Common Cause chapter head undertaking a good-government drive. For the next several days she and I made our evening troop through the tenements, she doing the talking with her rat-a-tat-tat Spanish, I standing there trying to nod in the right places. Despite the dire conditions, getting the signatures was not always easy. It is a rule of life in such places to minimize contacts with authority, since just about everyone has a skeleton in his or her closet, such as an undisclosed source of income that stands to be exposed. Besides, people on the financial edge just don't like to make trouble. Still, we got the
We celebrated the occasion with a picket line in which tenants carried placards announcing their views of Shemstein and the city administration.

signatures, calling in Ping to translate for the Chinese.

Before we could get Shemstein, however, we had to serve him with the complaint, and before we could do that, we had to find him. This was not a simple matter either, since Shemstein’s only listed address was a maildrop, and repeated calls and letters went unanswered. I even tracked down elderly couples who were listed as second mortgagees on his deeds; sitting in a living room on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, I listened to one such couple lament how Shemstein had welshed on his debt to them. This was reinforcing but it didn’t get me any closer to Shemstein.

Finally Bernie decided that if the maildrop was all Shemstein had listed, then the maildrop was what we would serve. It was on 42nd Street, not far from the New York Public Library. The narrow staircase looked forbidding—what ghouls and goons might Shemstein have lurking up there? As it turned out, he had neither ghouls nor goons but rather a lone woman manning a switchboard as though it were a battleship’s controls. She was square-shouldered and brawny, her black hair lacquered fast, lipstick blazing, and breasts boosted atop an expanding girth, contoured by her cashmere sweater. She was fearsome, and at the sight of the legal complaint in its telltale blue bin-

ding, she exploded.

“You get that out of here,” she shrieked. “There’s no Shemstein here. You have no business...you get that thing out of here.” As she was barricaded behind the switchboard, there was no way I could touch her physically with the complaint—the legal requirement of service—and I wasn’t sure whether throwing it was sufficient. The only alternative was retreat. Shemstein knew his business. Minutes before I had had visions of him handcuffed before a judge, begging for mercy. Now he was off free.

This was my first failure as a process-server. I wandered down 42nd Street towards Grand Central Station, wondering what to do next. I recalled hearing somewhere that the police had to help you serve process if you asked them. It sounded unlikely, but having no better plan, I set off to find the police.

I came upon a couple of burly policemen, picking their teeth as they emerged from a luncheonette on Madison Avenue. My request seemed to puzzle them, but to my amazement, they agreed to help. As I followed them up the staircase, their shoulders just about touching the walls, I felt I now knew how Charlie Conerly, the New York Giants quarterback, felt when he dropped back into the pocket behind Jack Stroud and Roosevelt Brown. Mrs. Commando, however, was not impressed. “What did you bring them for?” she shrieked, with no less belligerence than before. “This is an office. You get them out of here.” She was up and waving her arms, but the complaint was served. Shemstein was begging for mercy before the judge again.

Only, not quite yet. The American judicial system was not formulated with people like the Henry Street tenants in mind. To start the 7A, these tenants needed to appear in court at 10 a.m. one morning in early March—no problem for Shemstein’s lawyer, but quite a production for two buildings full of tenants, some of whom were elderly and infirm. We stood in the back of the courtroom for what seemed like hours as we waited for the clerk to get to our case. When he finally did, we learned that Shemstein had somehow managed to get a postponement. Hardship, no doubt.

Finally, we obtained the court order. It was with a sense of exultation that I made the rounds with Mrs. Rivera to help collect the rents—a bit perhaps like the Sandinistas felt when they took over the Nicaraguan treasury. But the money in slum housing is not in rents; it is in such things
as depreciation, which were of use to the landlord but of absolutely no use to ourselves. And let's be honest: not everyone pays his rent on time, and under rent control, not that much cash was coming in to begin with. My recollection is that after we had paid the bills we didn't have a great deal left over for repairs. At least this was so for the months I was there. The revolution is exhilarating. Running the state afterwards is something else.

While this 7A was working its way slowly through the esophagus of the courts, the people at Henry Street were still without heat and hot water. This was the administration of Mayor John Lindsay, and while the streets on the Lower East Side were not paved with gold, there was an emergency heating program, under which the city would send a truck to fill an empty oil tank and even fix the boiler. It sounded too good to be true.

It was. Every time we called, it was another story. First they said they would send an inspector. Then they said they had to contact the landlord (an inspired regulation, that). Then they said they could not do anything because the tenants weren't paying their rents to the city. Then they started sending over employees who said they couldn't do the work because they were boiler men and not plumbers; or were plumbers and not boiler men. It was totally beyond me how a city could set up a program to help desperate tenants, and then erect impediments like these.

I drafted a letter of protest to Mayor Lindsay, reciting all these difficulties and others I haven't mentioned. We translated it into Spanish and Chinese so that everyone in the two buildings could sign and sent copies to *The New York Times*. In my naivety, I thought this was the blockbuster move that would really shake up city hall. By some miracle, the letters seemed to work. By the end of the day, the heat was on. Over the past 13 years I have been engaged in various kinds of "public interest" work here in Washington. But I can think of nothing I've done in that period that helped concrete individuals the way we did when we got the boiler fixed on Henry Street.

By the late sixties, having been tamed by the investigators, MFY also was falling out of favor with the quasi-political leaders of the Lower East Side. Poverty money represented, simply, jobs and power; and leaders of local organizations were wondering why the uptown types—such was now the perception—who ran MFY were getting so much of both. Staff salaries at MFY were quite competitive, and the term "poverty pimp" was appearing in the raucous "letters" columns of *The Village Voice*.

Nevertheless, MFY had retained the contract to run the Youth Corps program for another summer, and in the spring I was transferred back to this program.

It was during the registration for this Youth Corps program that I first began to think in a serious way about what has come to be called "waste, fraud, and abuse." A long line of teenagers extended down the staircase at 255 East Houston, and I was one of the people conducting the registration on the second floor. The regulations said that only those below the "poverty level" were eligible; this meant, as best I can recall, $4,500 a year for a family of four, or $21.63 per person per week. More than that, you were too well off.

"Family income" can be a pretty nebulous concept in places like the Lower East Side. Does the niece sleeping on the couch for a few months count as "family"? What about the money your mother gets—in cash—for working in the laundromat on weekends? The way such questions were resolved was simply to ask the kids. Most offered sums safely beneath the ceiling; word does get around. A few, however, blurted out some higher figure—$4,900 perhaps or even $6,200—causing me to wince. These were invariably the nicest kids, the ones you saw dressed in white on Sundays with bibles under their arms, who showed you a deference that you didn't deserve. Still, the regulations were the regulations, weren't they? When you told them you were sorry, these kids actually thanked you, and departed as politely as they had come.

An MFY supervisor, whom I will call Enrique, came by on a routine check. Proud of my diligence, I showed Enrique my stack of rejects. He, however, was not pleased, especially about those that were near the borderline. "We do not want to turn those kids away," he said, in a way that made me remember, with shame, that I was after all only a guest in someone else's house.
Enrique seated himself at my registration station and showed me how it was done. "How much do your parents make?" he asked the next person in line.

"Uh, $4,800," this teenager replied tentatively, as though wary of thin ice.

"But are you completely sure? Or is that just an estimate?"

"Uh. Uh-huh."

"Your father may have missed a week or two of work because he was sick...?" And so on until, if possible, the individual was down to the requisite level. It was a little like the drill a tax preparer runs you through. Enrique then turned the station back to me, and I proceeded to follow his example.

Whenever I hear Reagan recite his litany of anti-poverty "abuse," I think of that Youth Corps registration, and wonder what exactly he has in mind. I wonder too whether he would sit there and tell a 13-year-old that he can't have a job because he may be living on a little more than $21.63 a week.

A different poverty

A year, two years, after I left the Lower East Side, my old apartment at 131 Pitt Street had become a psychedelic crash pad. A few years after that, the building had been gutted by fire. A few years after that, 131 Pitt Street was a pile of rubble. The surrounding streets that had been so alive had become a grim combat zone. In the eerie mid-day quiet, drug dealers were doing business from abandoned buildings, passing their envelopes through holes in the concrete blocks with which the city had tried to seal these buildings off. Hot dog vendors would set up their carts nearby, so brisk and open was the trade. Some blocks east of Avenue B had been virtually demolished; the neighborhood wasn't even there. 255 East Houston Street had become a branch of the New York City Department of Social Services.

"There is no demonstrable record" that VISTA had "any effect on poverty in this country." So declared James H. Burnley IV, Reagan's first VISTA chief and a Republican district chairman in North Carolina prior to his appointment. To be sure, VISTA volunteers like myself didn't make much of a dent in poverty on the Lower East Side. If there is less poverty there now, it's mainly because there are fewer dwellings in which it can reside. And as the real estate operators now move in, buying and selling the remaining buildings at enormous markups, raising rents to the $700-a-month level and even higher, making life miserable for existing low-rent tenants to force them out, there will be still fewer dwellings for those at the bottom. It is widely suspected that when Mayor Koch finally routed the pushers from parts of the Lower East Side a number of months ago, it was not entirely for the benefit of the welfare mothers there.

Still, I like to think that my year in VISTA was not totally without value. At the very least, I developed an immunity to the cliched views of poverty and how to reduce it that issue forth from people like Reagan and his counterparts on the political left. Many volunteers, especially in smaller communities and rural areas, have made a significant impact. But the primary value of a program like VISTA may be in addressing a kind of poverty that the Reaganites are inclined to overlook—the kind which causes comfortable Americans to live oblivious to the need that exists in our own country and the world. If there were not so much of this kind of poverty, there wouldn't be as much of the other kind either.

Indeed, a substantial portion of VISTA volunteers have gone on to lives of public service. A government program, of course, is hardly the only way to promote a culture of service. But the government affects our mores and culture for better or worse; abolishing VISTA, as the Reagan administration wants to do, wouldn't change that. When you consider the other things the federal government fosters and promotes—from synfuels to tobacco—at much greater expense, then VISTA stacks up fairly well by comparison.

In theory, I am inclined to agree with the Reaganites that people shouldn't expect the government to fund "social change!" In practice, however, I don't see how you could get the boiler working on Henry Street without making trouble for somebody. Should we simply have handed out charcoal and blankets to the freezing tenants? But even if such realities are unacceptable to the Reaganites, what about the VISTA volunteers who have helped start local enterprises such as crafts co-ops for low income producers in West Virginia and South Dakota? Isn't such entrepreneurship worth supporting?

VISTA hasn't eliminated poverty. But if that were the standard, capitalism would be judged a failure as well. In Washington's clamor of self-interest, we need ways like VISTA to encourage people to think about the problems of their neighbors.