

VITAL FORCE: OLDER ADULTS ACTIVELY ENGAGED IN COMMUNITY

Summary of December 9 VAN Meeting, Midtown YWCA, Minneapolis

INTRODUCTIONS

Jan Hively, VAN Senior Advisor, welcomed the group. Participants introduced themselves and responded to the request: “Tell us what’s special about one person who comes to mind as you think about older adults actively engaged in their communities.”

Here are some fragments from the responses:

- ♦ Sargent Shriver – he was always thinking about what comes next
- ♦ A caregiver who brightens the lives of everyone in her senior living facility
- ♦ Still engaged on his 100th birthday
- ♦ Always volunteering – through many life transitions
- ♦ Dances from the heart – reaches out to others
- ♦ Makes the moves to maximize access and independence in spite of disability
- ♦ Gets people together across communities
- ♦ Ageless – enthusiastic – caring
- ♦ In spite of immobility, makes home visits to the elderly by phone
- ♦ Supports continuing community involvement of spouse with Alzheimers
- ♦ At 95, starting to slow down so that we can keep up with her and her social action groups
- ♦ Sold her possessions and joined the Peace Corps
- ♦ Nellie Stone Johnson – union leader, first Black woman elected in MN
- ♦ Mentor offering wisdom and love
- ♦ Politically active
- ♦ Started Women Welcoming Women Worldwide (WWW)
- ♦ Brings equipment to teach science at a public pier in Florida
- ♦ Intellectual curiosity and physical energy
- ♦ Generous
- ♦ Creates recitations – senior theater
- ♦ Humor
- ♦ Expresses joy of life – writing – where she is there is a glow
- ♦ Persistent
- ♦ Eager to learn and to share
- ♦ Always questioning
- ♦ Building and fixing
- ♦ Ability to stay centered and say no -- maintains personal space
- ♦ Reads
- ♦ Gets out every day, on her own in spite of disability, via public transportation
- ♦ Organizing
- ♦ Founding mother

JIM SCHEIBEL, PRESENTER

Jim Scheibel directs the Ramsey Action Programs (RAP). Previously, he has served as the Mayor of the City of St. Paul, director of the National Senior Service Corps, and director of Project for Pride in Living (PPL).

Jim is passionately committed to creating another option for older adults to be actively engaged in community. When he was directing the Senior Corps in Washington a decade ago, he fostered the “Experience Corps,” now managed through Civic Ventures and focused on older adults tutoring in the schools. Over the last several years, Jim has chaired the board of the national Ignatian Lay Volunteer Corps (LVC), encouraging spiritual growth along with community service. There are now a dozen LVC groups in the Twin Cities. Over the last few months, Jim has borrowed from both the Experience Corps and Ignatian LVC while developing the “Vital Force” program concepts in collaboration with VAN.

Jim asked the VAN meeting participants the same question that he has been asking others over the last year: “How would you like to be involved in the community? What do you want to get out of it?” Here are some examples of the responses from the VAN participants:

- ♦ Keep on learning
- ♦ Keep working
- ♦ Stay physically active
- ♦ Promote environmental sustainability
- ♦ Start a revolution -- Change the way people think about aging
- ♦ Promote peace
- ♦ Connect with youth
- ♦ Make a difference
- ♦ Solve problems
- ♦ Build community
- ♦ Experience and learn from diversity
- ♦ Be part of something greater
- ♦ Have an impact
- ♦ Show results
- ♦ Give back
- ♦ Grow spiritually
- ♦ Leave a legacy

These responses and his interviews have confirmed what Jim already suspected: Our aging population is a vital force ready to build our communities. Adults over 55 want to share their rich experiences and skills, they want to give back, and they want to make a difference. Through a Vital Force network of teams led by older adult volunteers, VAN will provide a framework to allow them to do just that—and to leverage their considerable skills, experience, and insight to achieve real, measurable improvement in our community.

In his interviews, Jim has found out what older adults want in a Vital Force program model:

- ♦ Older adult-directed
- ♦ Flexible
- ♦ Durable – sustainable
- ♦ Modest cost

- ♦ Can spread across the U.S. or the world – Replicable

The interviewees want more than to provide services as community volunteers. They also want civic engagement. “I want to be a strong citizen.” “I want to be political.” “I want to be involved with change.”

DENNIS DONOVAN, Presenter

Jim introduced Dennis Donovan from the Public Achievement program in the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the U of MN Humphrey Institute. Jim knew Dennis when he was principal of St. Bernard’s School in St. Paul, developing the demonstration model for Public Achievement, currently a youth development program. The model for Vital Force is similar to the Public Achievement model.

Dennis described Public Achievement as a process for supporting ordinary citizens as they take action in the public arena. It’s a process for doing grassroots democracy building, applicable for people from age 5 to 101. A team comes together around something that matters. Now there are teams at 30 sites in Minnesota, most in schools or faith-based organizations. There are teams at a total of 100 sites in seven regions around the nation. There is a democracy coach for each team. There is an effort to make sure that each team reflects diversity, including diversity in views, gender, and age. In a way, the program is a throwback to the WPA (Works Progress Administration) set up to provide jobs and build community during the depression. People involved with the WPA projects felt they were citizens because they were building things.

JIM AND DENNIS

The idea is to get people together around their common interests. Most of them are already doing good work. We will provide a framework that includes a process for reflecting on the learning that has occurred, some tools for planning and getting the work done, and some common language. We recognize that everyone will have something important to offer to the process. Democracy is the unfinished business of the people.

Once we locate a coach/organizer who is excited about the effort:

1. The coach/organizer recruits a half dozen or more people
2. The group does some research to identify a common issue
3. The group maps the strengths/assets of its participants and community
4. The group does a power analysis and creates a strategy
5. The group engages in a plan of action
6. The group reflects on its experiences – What worked? What didn’t work? What was learned
7. The group celebrates its accomplishments

Vital Force will be structured around the principle that the most important lessons of democracy come from doing public work, from solving problems, and finding ways to cooperate with people who are different. Both led and driven by older Americans, Vital Force will provide an experiential education in grassroots community building. Vital Force will provide the framework and establish sites, recruit and train volunteer coordinator/coaches, and work to draw people to the program. Team members

themselves will research and choose issues, develop a plan to address them, carry it out, and evaluate and celebrate results. They may focus on advocacy or direct service or a combination of both.

The commitment for each Vital Force team would be to stick with it for one year, at the end of which all of the teams would come together. Each Vital Force team will be facilitated by a coach who serves as recruiter and organizer to the initiative. Each team will be associated with some community institution or organization. These may include community centers, neighborhoods, libraries, churches, alumni groups, business retiree groups, etc. Team members should expect to spend approximately 10 hours a week for one year on a project.

The plan is to begin by selecting three pilot sites for Vital Force in January. We plan to provide training in late January or early February for organizers/coaches and organizational liaisons. The training plan, that integrates elements of Public Achievement with best practices for older adult education, will be evaluated and revised based on the first trial. The work-to-date of the three pilots will be presented at “Vital Aging ~ Vital Communities: The 2004 Summit” on May 13, 2004, where Vital Force will be officially launched. A few additional Vital Force teams will be formed during 2004. Additional resources to expand the work are being sought through two national grant proposals. As time moves on, coaches may use a “train the trainer” approach, and may themselves get together to share strengths and strategies.

When the Vital Force concept was presented at a Second Journey conference in North Carolina this fall, individuals from a number of states expressed interest in starting a Vital Force in their areas. The program is designed to be replicated easily and cost-effectively. All that will be needed to start a new Vital Force team will be community interest, an organization willing to serve as the host, and identification of a volunteer to serve as organizer/coach. The curriculum and lesson plans for coach training will be formalized into a manual, to train coaches from other states and communities. The program’s affiliation with the University of Minnesota will allow for ongoing research and evaluation.

DISCUSSION

- ♦ *Will there be a coordinating activity?* Yes, for the coaches.
- ♦ *Is this similar to assets-based work done by the Search Institute and Healthy Communities for Youth?* Yes, and also the work of the ABCD (Asset-based Community Development) Institute in Chicago, co-directed by John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann. Jody will speak at the May 13 Vital Aging Summit.
- ♦ *Will you require new funding for this new effort?* Yes. We have submitted proposals from VAN to the Corporation for National Service and the National Council on Aging/Met Life Foundation. We have submitted a proposal to cover the pilots to the U’s Council on Public Engagement, from the Humphrey Institute in collaboration with VAN. The funding is needed for training and coordination.
- ♦ *What are VAN’s goals for the pilots?* We’re just developing the framework for selecting the pilots. We will probably focus on teams that are interested in expanding

support for vital aging, in one way or another. Public Achievement will provide technical assistance to support the team efforts, just as they do now with their youth projects. We hope that the pilots will act as incubators.

- ♦ *Will this compete with other non-profits seeking older adult volunteers?* We assume that most of the Vital Force teams will be affiliated with “other non-profits”. Vital Force will support small groups of people interested in addressing an issue or solving a problem over an approximate 12 month period, who then go on to other issues or institutions or dissolve. We will provide training and some tools and some connection among groups to aid the community-building process. We hope that the work of Vital Force will actually change institutions so that they work well for and with everybody, including older adults.
- ♦ *What will be the duration of the training?* Probably 10 hours in two days for the coaches before the team effort begins, followed by one hour of reflection each week. Public Achievement has a 50-50 rule for feedback sessions: 50% for problem solving, and 50% for reflection.
- ♦ *Is it correct to say that Vital Force will have a dual focus?* Yes. We want to tap the vital force in vital agers who want to keep learning and make a difference. And we want to apply that vital force to create more vital communities.

PROCESS FOR PARTICIPATING IN VITAL FORCE

Jim handed out a form for participants to fill out if they wish to help pilot Vital Force, receive mailings about Vital Force projects, and/or be kept informed about Vital Force.

Just as Harris Wofford, the former director of the Corporation for National Service, suggested that “Every person should ask the question, ‘Where do I do Americorps?’” Jim hopes that “Every person will ask, ‘Where do I want to contribute my Vital Force?’”

Note: You can request a copy of the Vital Force Sign-up Form by leaving your name and address on the VAN voice mail line: 612-626-5555, or by e-mailing Julia Classen, Julia@aurora.consult.com.