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## Editor's Notes IUJSL Volume 2 Issue 2 Spring 2013

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## The Editors' Notes

*Note: We have given this space to our departing AmeriCorps/VISTA as she leaves us to take on a new position as Lead VISTA in Wisconsin.*

There are three reasons that most people typically choose to do service: for their own benefit, for the benefit of others, or because it is an undeniable part of their identity. In doing it for their own advantage, they may serve because it will “look good” for them or makes others see them in a positive light. Knowing they did a job well done brings momentary happiness because they’ve done a good deed. When one’s reason for service is for the benefit of others, which is reflected in short term mission or alternative break trips, participants know they are making a real difference in a community. However, this joy is usually temporary; over time, the experience is nothing more than the photographs and friendships that remain. The third reason people serve is because it is a part of their identity. They feel so passionately about service and see no other way to live than to put others needs ahead of their own in every facet of life. This is where my journey to becoming an AmeriCorps/VISTA in South Carolina Campus Compact began, and what a journey it has been.

Moving to Columbia, South Carolina, has been one of the greatest challenges and learning experiences of my twenty-four years. Being from the Chicago suburbs and having grown up in a Middle-Class neighborhood, I knew that my eyes were going to be opened, but not to this extent. Now I was thrown into a population where obesity (76%) and rocket-high unemployment (50%) are the norm, which has blown my mind. Rather than looking at poverty from the viewpoint of have and have-not, I learned to look into the culture of poverty and work from the grassroots up. After meeting the elderly Mary Hart at a Diabetes conference and hearing her concerns about her friends being diagnosed with type-2 Diabetes, I knew we had to take action. Cracking the nut of Diabetes prevention, not management, has been the focus of my VISTA year.

South Carolina is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most food deprived state, yet it has an 11-month growing season – a walking contradiction. A seed was planted in my mind and I focused my VISTA year on food justice and Diabetes prevention. The culture in the South dictates that one must add six months to any deadline, because plans move as slow as the molasses they put in their home-baked sweets. Being an outsider with a funny accent, it seemed that community partners immediately had their guard up from the moment we shook hands. What does this girl from the North know about us? Haven’t others come in just to fall short on their promises? How much will this cost us? With those questions in mind, I organized a game plan like none Columbia has ever seen.

-ix-

***Journal for Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change* Spring 2013**

After securing a grant from Center for Disease control and six months of weekly meetings with a local church, we unveiled our regional project: the “Big Dig” event. The day was exciting: from the rain stopping just ten minutes before kick-off, children splashing in puddles, young and old planting together, three colleges collaborating, a wide variety of races/socioeconomic status/gender/age, but most of all- 80 year old Ms. Mary Hart *beaming* with joy that we had followed through.

Poverty is not about what you have, but how you use your resources- both possessions and wisdom. Ms. Hart may not drive a Corvette or eat steak nightly, but she is rich in love and compassion. Service does not have to cost anything more than your time. Using resources- grants, donations, and energy can literally move mountains, or in our case, convert an overgrown, ugly lot into a blooming, beautiful community garden. Mobilizing resources available and gaining community trust has been the most transformative and rewarding experience throughout my VISTA year. As I move forward as VISTA Leader for Wisconsin Campus Compact starting in July 2012, I look forward to the opportunity to spread my best practices in another region. While I hope that my project will be sustainable in South Carolina, I realize that the church needs to take ownership and develop the project in the way they see fit. Disbanding relationship is the most difficult aspect of my program, but I leave knowing I made my mark and used my resources to the best of my ability- not because of personal gain or temporary pleasure, but because service is a significant aspect of my identity.

--Jamie Opdyke--

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***Journal for Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change Spring 2013***