

“Living the VISTA Life: From A to Z”

One of ten Jury’s Choice winners at the 2005 NW National Service Symposium, Portland, OR

By Amy Potthast • 2005

NOTE: The names of some of the AmeriCorps members in the story are real. The names of others are made up.

A is for the AmeriCorps Kickoff

The official start of the AmeriCorps service season, the Kickoff is where you meet people you will see continually through out the year. Meet your new tribe.

The day looks like this: you talk with people about what they do, search for your pen and a place to write their e-mail addresses, and hunt for your business card. (You hand out 28 copies.) You find a group from your program to eat lunch with on the balcony and you find out who is happy and who is not at their site. And in the afternoon (civic engagement theme), you realize how cool it is, in this culture, to be arrested for your ideals.

B is for Bicycling

As a VISTA in Portland you learn quickly to find a cheap way to get around.

The sun radiates heat, the skin-tingling kind, enough to get you some sweat. You show up early for a meeting and duck into a restroom. Your face is splotchy and pink. A red mark dents your forehead where the helmet hit. You clean up as best you can, rinse your face, apply fresh lipstick, and the director of an AmeriCorps program glides through the door just as you are peeling off your sweaty socks.

Hi, she says – an eyebrow raised.

Hi, you smile back.

C is for Community

You’re new to town, but you’re not alone, baby. All around you are members – of your AmeriCorps community.

Folks start arriving, almost on time, for your potluck. You accept each contribution and smile giddily. People bring wine and beer. People bring vegetables and ginger, garlic and apples, and are eager to help you in the kitchen. The dining room table fills quickly with dishes. You put Pato in charge of CDs. “Are you eating?” you ask everyone. They are eating. You hear laughter, you introduce people cross-stream, they are meeting each other anyway, kindred spirits right and left. After an hour, Aron brings you a plate of food and says, “Eat.” You are so happy, you eat.

D is for Judging the Mural Design Contest

It’s your job to pick the one that will become a mural in the school yard.

The former mayor is here, a prominent insurance agent, a city counselor, and the head of the Chamber of Commerce. Two other AmeriCorps members are here, as well as 150 drawings from children ages 5-9, spread out on five cafeteria tables. 150 depictions of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life, legacy, dream. You have 20 minutes to decide which ones work for you, after which time you will defend your choices. Ready? Go.

E is for Ed Award

When you're offered money towards your education, you want to invest it well.

You've heard there are ways to get a laptop. Enroll in school (you already know what you'll study) and whatever isn't used for tuition and fees, they'll give you back. But you've also heard about ways to enroll in programs overseas, and what you think of immediately is cycling along the sea, the warm Mediterranean sun, the blue sky meeting the blue water, and the dark and handsome olive farmers of southern France.

F is for Facilitating Meetings, or Finding your Inner Leader

You aren't sure the first time whether it's your responsibility or not. But the service project was your idea, and you called the meeting. So you go for it.

At the last minute you jot down some ideas for an agenda, and ask Liz, nicely, to make copies. You greet everyone as they come in, you smile, say thanks. You ask everyone to introduce themselves and you do too. When the agenda is ready, you pass copies around and ask people why they want to work together on this project. The time goes fast. People say, "This is going to be really fun for the kids," and "I'm so psyched about working with everyone!" In one hour you know everything you came in wondering about, and you leave with a list of projects to tackle before next month's meeting.

G is for Getting Things Done

It's what you guys are known for. Six months in and...

Annie has tutors for recovering high-school users who want to take their GED; Abe's connected the dots of community resources to get almost 300 kids fed everyday this summer; Jenny's funded her project for the next three years; Dee Dee's opened a new food bank that serves her county; Jessica's received \$20,000 – the third-largest grant of anyone in her county – from the United Way; Lark and Hillary have galvanized two middle schools full of kids, who want to come to school now, if only to stay for after-school belly-dancing classes and guitar playing; Kristen's spread the word about the Red Cross's services to speakers of other languages than English; Kristine's won her clinic an award from a local paper for inspiring the largest number of cash donors in the twentysomething age group; Katie's taught hundreds of first-time parents how to correctly install their car seats; Rachel's found respite for parents of kids with disabilities – and relief for the kids (statistically at high risk for abuse from overwrought parents); Tracy's helped prepare her county for biological attack; and Maighie's earned kudos from the governor's daughter for her outstanding report on months' worth of focus groups. So one might ask, what are your plans for the rest of your year?

H is for Staying Healthy.

The stipend forces you to make wiser choices.

Dried beans are not only cheaper than canned ones, they also lack the sodium. Why eat expensive white crackers, empty of nutrition and incapable of keeping you full? Water's the cheapest beverage and the reason you drink is to re-hydrate, anyway. If you need that full feeling, Clif Bars are such a better investment than Snickers. Walking's the cheapest way to get around, and cycling comes in second. Keeping a vegetarian kitchen isn't always an ethical choice, sometimes it's financial. You have health insurance, but not dental – and that's all you need to remember to brush regularly. Breakfast needs to hold you five or more hours; are you sure it's Apple Jacks you want in your cart?

I is for the Intangible Results of your Service

As a VISTA, you're doing things indirectly; sometimes the outcomes of all your hard work seem indirect too.

It's 20 years from today. The nine-year-old who helped design this mural is all grown up now. Her son will start kindergarten here tomorrow, and she brings him by the school to meet his new teacher. As they turn to get back in the car, she remembers the mural and says, "Wait, I want to show you something."

They come here, behind the school, and find it, faded some with the sun and rain, but clear: the rainbow, the image of Martin Luther King, Jr., surrounded by the people who were the beneficiaries (direct and indirect) of his service, and the words, "Qué es tu sueño? – What is your dream?" Her eyes water up and she says to her little boy, "This is something Mommy and her friends did, when they were little, like you."

J is for Journaling, Electronically

You come to the last page of your notebook so your best friend in Khartoum suggests you start a blog.

You figure that by the end of your service this journal will be a valuable record of a year in the life of a VISTA. A VISTA Jones' Diary. Keri Russell will play you in the romantic comedy version, and any proceeds will fund prisoner education programs.

K is for Karmic Happiness

If Karma is the total of all your good versus bad deeds, this year should put you in the black.

L is for List Serves

You belong to at least ten.

You read training and project announcements on one and copy them to another; you post photographs to several and read most in the form of the Daily Digest. The smallest is read by as few as 15 people, the largest by over 6,000. They are the bread and butter of your inbox.

M is for Money

On less than a thousand dollars a month, you're going crazy and messing up your finances. You're secretly plotting to start a real job the day after your service ends.

But then you think of the clients your program serves – who won't easily be hired anytime soon, who are on disability, who don't have your skills, who don't have your degree and your university's name on their resumé. Who are already working full time, and still struggling to pay rent (they have kids). Who don't have a computer at home, who've lost their homes, who are far from anything resembling a home.

When do their years of service end?

N is for Newsletters

Your favorite part of your job is putting together a monthly newsletter.

Your digital camera stays in your bag and the people you serve are sick of its flash. You strive to anticipate the needs of your readers, you want to make each page fun to read, even though it's probably toilet reading. It takes one week to put together, the interviews, the book review, the contributions from others, the details for each announcement, and to make sure the copy's flawless (okay, not always flawless). Before sending it out, you add personal notes on stickies. To your readers, this is how you show your love.

O is for Office Politics

This is the underside of your work as a VISTA.

Steph was bumped from the all-staff meeting agenda: "She doesn't have anything to add." Ann's been babysitting for her supervisor's kids – at the office. Dina's referred to as the volunteer and wasn't included in the staff retreat. Jack's supervisor went on vacation – without telling him. Ben's supervisor claimed all the credit for his project at a board meeting, while Ben was sitting right there.

The challenges of this year aren't simply contributing to your community and doing it on a stipend. They include checking your desire for recognition, and reminding yourself who you are and why you are doing this work.

P is for Avoiding Politics

Tough in an election year, but you grin and bear it.

At least while you have the AmeriCorps logo on.

Q is for the Queen of Freebies

You become a magnet.

One desk from Freecycle.org; one bike from Create a Commuter; another bike from the barista at Peet's Coffee downtown; two tickets to a play at Portland Center Stage; two tickets to a Blazers game; one roundtrip plane ticket anywhere in the U.S.; one entrance to the Volunteer Administrators conference; at least 75 work-related meals in the course of the year; one popcorn at the movies.

R is for Taking Risks

You have a year to change the world, and the clock is ticking.

S is for Shelter

As a VISTA, you live with three other people so you can afford your rent.

All of you are underemployed, and everyone has something in common with you. Mitch drinks tea and is a woman; John works at Goodwill where you shop regularly; Kramer drinks the coffee you leave behind when you go to work and – well, you make the coffee he drinks. Your food is communal, which feels like, you buy it and they eat it while you are away at a training. You all like to have parties and you know each others' friends by name. You have monthly chores to do and monthly bills to pay, and when you are away, you miss them.

T is for Twenty Questions

On the road trip home from Leader Corps you laughed so hard your stomach hurt.

1. Female? No. 2. Non-white? Yes. 3. American? Yes. 4. Living? Um... 4. Fictional? Yes. 5. Human? No. 6. Hairy?. Not really. 7. Yoda? Yes. (You're so good, you sometimes guess with just 7.)

U is for Used Clothes

All of your clothes are either gifts from your mother or second-hand.

Another game is, add up how much today's clothes cost. Shoes: \$3, Goodwill. Socks: Free (Grandma's spare). Pants: \$5, Goodwill. Underwear: Free (gift from Mom). Undershirt: \$3, Salvation Army. Sweater: \$4, Salvation Army. Jacket: \$2, City Repair Clothing Sale. Necklace: \$5, Goodwill. Today's total: \$22.

V is for Volunteering

Yes, you spend your day working to end poverty in Oregon. Is that enough?

Wednesday nights you work with Charlie, a 7-year-old Hmong boy in St. John's. English isn't spoken at home, and he's extremely introverted. He's the baby of six kids and your guess is, he

probably doesn't have to say anything at home. He just has to lift a hand and one of his older sisters is there to hand him whatever he wants.

In other words, the boy doesn't talk much.

You're working on that, but it's not that you want him to open up and emote. You just want him to be able to speak English well, including in full sentences. His favorite sentence of all is wordless; it's a shrug. You never knew how versatile the shrug was before working with Charlie. Yes/no question? A shrug works. Open-ended question? Use a shrug there too.

The best part of working with Charlie is seeing his smile. He doesn't do that a lot, and he's working so darn hard when you're together that he – you both – forget that the world is really a fun place to be. So sometimes you just look over at him, say something goofy, and he smiles.

W is for Writing Grants

Your officemates have never seen this side of you and won't soon forget it.

The day you get the e-mail, the green light, the YES!, the I LOVE YOU!, the funding, you leap out of your swivel chair and do the happy grant dance at your desk.

X is for Xenophobia

Coming into this year you thought you knew plenty enough about communicating cross-culturally and felt comfortable discussing diversity issues.

At Leader Corps Sueko says again how uncomfortable she feels around white people. You're white, she's in your small group and you don't know how to respond to this, how to answer for white people. You don't even know how to answer for yourself.

You're doing role plays at the Continuing Development Training. Esteban wants to confront a colleague who said something ugly about Mexican culture. People are slow to volunteer to act Esteban's part. You're thinking of how to approach the colleague, when Esteban says, "Nobody wants to sit in my place."

You're at a regional training on leadership and Hitler's name comes up. Across the table Leah starts to tell you about Jewish history, Nazi Germany and ghettos in Eastern Europe. You know all this. But she keeps talking. You look Irish, so she thinks you don't know. But your family is Jewish too.

Y is for a Boss who Says Yes.

And YES is a much easier word to work with than NO.

Z is for the Zone of Proximal Development

This year you discover a new application for Lev Vygotsky's theory that a student can perform a task under adult guidance or with peer collaboration that they could not have achieved alone. It works in AmeriCorps, too.

Lorraine was in charge of painting bathrooms. She's not coming. In fact, because of the ice storm this morning, half of the members who had signed up are not showing up. You have to re-paint two bathrooms in three days, with primer coats, top coats, drying time and the ceiling. And the principal has expressed concern about paint dripping on the floors. You know nothing about painting anything. There's no momentum. No one knows what to do. Two people leave to work on something they know how to do.

You pull Matt into the hallway. Matt went to Leader Corps.

"We need a leader, Matt," you say.

"Okay," Matt says. He goes back into the bathroom, looks around and starts organizing the crew. The next day you get a few more members, and the day after that even more.

In three days, the bathrooms get done.

(Whew.)

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"The VISTA service year is a 24-hour endeavor, for 12 months. To talk about a single day at site doesn't get at the heart of the year, and neither does a description of living a year at 105 percent of poverty-level income. This essay attempts to look at the VISTA service year from as many angles as possible, using the English alphabet as a guide."