

Summer of Service, 1963

Michael J. Brown

Michael J. Brown is a community organizer, trainer, and consultant in Boston.

As the nation begins to put President Clinton's "National Service Program" into action, I recall my own "summer of service" at a Quaker workcamp just 30 years ago, and wonder: What will the youth of today learn about and from the communities they go to "serve?" What will the people in those communities served learn about themselves? For whose benefit is national service intended?

In 1963 I was 16 and one of about 20 teenagers who came together from all over the country for a workcamp sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee in Royal Oak Township, a small unincorporated municipality just outside the Detroit city limits. It included rows of "temporary" World War II housing in which we and many low-income families lived.

We came to work. And we worked hard—painting houses, clearing rubble-strewn lots of weeds and debris, and building a basketball court on one of the vacant lots. We had to shop, cook and clean up. We learned to manage ourselves with rules worked out by Quaker consensus. It was an intense summer of learning and personal growth for many of us. We learned how to work hard and how to get along with each other in tight surroundings. We also got a taste of what life was like for the families that lived in this "economically depressed" neighborhood. But primarily we learned about ourselves—who we were, what we could do.

For most of the summer, we worked with the other workcampers. Then, toward the end of the program, we did some-

*Will the youth in national
service learn that the people in
the communities where they
work have gifts, intelligence,
strength, and ideas?*

thing different. We painted the town hall and firehouse, but not by ourselves. The entire community came out to work—with dozens of paintbrushes and gallons of turquoise paint. The drab, peeling town hall turned a shining blue. Then the people from the community put on a big pot-luck lunch. The mayor (whose name was John Kennedy—"not the President," he assured us) made a short speech about his town and its people. He told us that even though the neighborhood was physically run down, the people in Royal Oak had resources, were intelligent, and could do things. And there they were, painting the buildings, making food, eating with us, talking with us about their community, their homes, and their dreams.

That day at workcamp was a different kind of learning experience. We were not only "serving." We were not so "apart" from them. We were painting alongside the people of Royal Oak Township, working on the same job, eating the same food. We did not become part of that community. But, through our experience, the people appeared in a different light that day. Royal Oak Township came to represent not so much a place for us to help, but a group of people who could do something for themselves.

What did I learn from that summer in 1963? In spite of the one day we painted the town hall, mostly I learned what I could do for others, and how to get along with people with whom I worked, not what people in the com-

munity could do for themselves.

Thinking back on it, I wonder what people in the community learned they could do for themselves. And I wonder what youth today who enter "national service" will learn about the communities they serve and the people in those communities.

Hopefully, they will learn about themselves and how to work with others. We did. But what will they learn about the people they "serve?" Will they learn that these are people who need to be served? Or will they learn that the people in the communities where they work also have gifts, intelligence, strength, and ideas?

Service vs. Organizing

There are two basically different orientations toward helping a community: service and organizing. Although not mutually exclusive, the two orientations are different enough from each other to affect how we see and what we learn about a community.

What do we mean by "service?" We "serve" people food in restaurants. We "serve" the poor. When we say "We are here to serve," I think of McDonalds: "We do it all for you." When we think of the word "service" we think of doing for others, giving to others. We have something (food, clothing, a religious service) that others need, and we present it to them. We serve. They receive.

Mental health counselors, teachers, doctors, nurses, waitresses and waiters, police officers and fire fighters all *serve* the public. They have something we can use. We are "clients." They give. We take.

Organizing is a different way to "help" a community. Organizing assumes first and fore-

*between service and
organizing will enhance
what the participants learn
from the experience.*

most that people have gifts, resources and intelligence. In community organizing, people are asked what they can contribute, not only what they need. An organizing mentality sees people as citizens, capable of doing things for themselves, not clients to be served. They are people who can strengthen their own community, especially when they do it together in an organization. The organization brings people together with a vision, a mission, leadership, structure, goals and time-lines to accomplish objectives of their own choosing.

The "iron rule" of organizing is, "Never do for others what they can do for themselves." Organizers do not "serve." They bring people into organizations. In those organizations, people learn through action and reflection that they can do things for themselves. If there is a need for refreshments at a meeting, the organizer doesn't bring them. She or he asks someone to bring refreshments or indicates that the need is there. If people in a neighborhood want to clean up a vacant lot, the organizer does not do it for them, but brings the neighbors together to see how they might get the lot cleaned up. The organizer poses questions. Should the city clean it? Does the city clean up in the "nicer" parts of town? Why not here? The organizer is there not to "serve" but to empower people.

What will be the nature of national service? Will the program and training have a "service" or "organizing" orientation? Will it convey that we do for you or will it convey that you and we together can improve the community? Awareness and knowledge of the differences between service and organizing will enhance what the participants learn from the experience. Knowing the differences between ser-

vice and organizing will help volunteers think about those they serve. They should try to apply the "iron rule" in those situations where it is applicable—it may better enable them to see that those they "serve" also having strengths and ideas, not just needs and disadvantages.

Investing in the Community

The structure of the service will also affect what the participants learn from the experience. There are ways to design service projects so people from the community are actively involved and empowered, not only served.

For example, service projects that have volunteers and community people working together give volunteers a better chance to see the strengths of those they "serve." The shining, turquoise town hall in Royal Oak Township stands out in my mind as a model.

Service projects might also focus on a whole community or city, rather than a series of tasks or projects. There could be a team of service volunteers who work together in one neighborhood or city, focusing on the overall needs of that community. In their training, volunteers could learn about the history, people, culture, politics, economic development, organizations and institutions of that community from the people who live there. Choice and direction of the projects could rest with community organizations or institutions. This kind of structure might stand a better chance of showing participants the strengths of the peo-

ple and institutions in that community. It might also provide a different experience for the community—one that is more likely to empower than serve them.

I learned much from my "summer of service" in 1963. I thought I was "investing myself" in the community I was helping. ("Invest Yourself" was in fact the title of the pamphlet put out by the Council of Churches where I discovered the Quaker workcamp.) But it seems to me that the greater part of the investment turned out to be in myself.

National service needs—as much as possible—to include an organizing orientation. Anything less sells short the community and the program participants. National service should include an awareness of organizing principles and practices. The program should be structured around work that allows the strengths of both participants and community people to flourish. At a minimum, we need to examine its intentions and be clear about its orientation toward the community. Will national service embody an organizing mentality, a service mentality, or will it find a way to do both? It is important not to undermine the program with inconsistent messages—within the program, its structure or in written statements about its intentions.

As we offer thousands of young people the opportunity to "serve" their nation, we need to think of the lessons they will learn from their experiences. Thirty years after my "summer of service," I wonder what will the lessons and legacy of national service be—both for the "servers" and those "served?"