

# COMMUNITY RADIO SHOW

“What My Two Years in National Service Taught Me about Community Strengthening”

Community Radio Show Text

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Guest: Angie Cole (Angie)

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**TODD:** For the first half of our show or so, Angie Cole, Projects Manager at Youth Count Prescott Valley Arizona, will share how her VISTA experience forged her passion for community work. Angie will talk about how coming to terms with the reality of living on a VISTA salary led her to be a better community organizer, communicator, and advocate. We will also hear how she was able to redefine poverty, expectations of abundance, and resources in order to do great community strengthening work.

First, though, to eliminate background noise, use your 'mute' or 'mic' button so that you can continue to hear today's speaker. If these are not working, you can also press \*6 on your phone during the call to mute your phone. You press \*6 again to un-mute your phone. If there is an emergency, feel free to hang up and then call back in.

Angie Cole holds a Bachelors degree from Prescott College in Education with an emphasis in experiential methods. She worked for the YMCA as a Program Manager for an outdoor education center before she served two years as a VISTA in Arizona doing intergenerational community strengthening work. She has a background in group facilitation, training, and team building.

Angie, welcome to the show.

**TODD:** Angie, what makes you passionate about your community work?

**ANGIE:** I love watching individuals, and especially groups, go through a transformation process, regaining hope, regaining confidence, going through struggles, frustrations, successes, and failures—and coming out of all of that with learning and growth.

**TODD:** Could I say that your National Service experience with VISTA had a lot of those types of experiences.

**ANGIE:** Absolutely, on multiple levels.

**TODD:** Can you give us an example of one?

**ANGIE:** Sure. A large group that we work with called the Substance Abuse Coalition started with two Federal grants with the charge of creating a county-wide strategic plan to reduce substance abuse. It was a growing process to talk about how to do this without being disconnected from what was happening in the community. We struggled with many questions. What was the best way to involve the community?

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Also, who has power to help with this in the community? What kind of forums do we need? How can people with positional power begin to let others take on different roles to get the work done?

We live in a large county the size of the state of New Jersey, so it was ambitious, but we held 14 forums. We were very thoughtful and included multiple perspectives on the problem and what people were willing to commit to do and what they were really passionate about. We also used one particular process that empowered rooms full of really diverse people to generate new ideas and solutions.

**TODD:** Does this all evolve out of a particular method?

**ANGIE:** It comes from the Institute of Cultural Affairs. It's a group facilitation method called the Technology of Participation. They have a few different processes, but we used one called the Consensus Building Workshop. There's a prescribed process of connecting people's ideas in a room. It's a powerful way to get a large amount of work done in a short period of time. To use the methods, you first need to be trained in the method, and that's available through the Institute of Cultural Affairs. They have offices all over the country. It's by the far the most important and useful professional development I've ever received. It's applicable professionally and personally because it's built around the idea of collective wisdom and knowledge. More heads are better than one. Specifically, it starts with a central question to solve. Our question was "How can we work together to reduce substance abuse in our county?" We defined who "we" were as well as defining other words in the sentence. We began with a individual brainstorming, then small group work, posting of ideas, and a facilitated process for pairing ideas up to continue refining ideas. In the end, the ideas are in different categories and each category is named—and this name ends up being an answer to the core question.

**TODD:** So, I can tell that you're passionate about your work. What I want to hear about today, also, is how you got that way. It seems to me that you must have had some great realizations and learning moments yourself to get you to where you are today.

**ANGIE:** Yes, it all started with my realization that in this arena of work, that one person can really make a difference. And that person doesn't have to have a lot of money or positional power—and this was the beginning of my exploration into what was possible. I know that sounds a little cheesy, but it's what kept me going and searching for new opportunities.

**TODD:** How exactly did you come to know that?

**ANGIE:** One of the most powerful things that happened to me as a VISTA is that I wasn't treated as "just" a VISTA. I was given responsibilities right from the beginning—as a really valuable part of the organization. For those people handling a VISTA project, providing a great entry into becoming a VISTA is really important for your members and for the project. Also, if I had an idea for something, I knew that it would be heard and evaluated and scrutinized like any other staff member's thoughts.

**TODD:** How then did you, as I've heard you say in the past, come to terms with living on a VISTA salary? It seems that, perhaps, you were given some somewhat intangible benefits vis-à-vis good management—but what else? Can you give us a list of, say, three things that managers and supervisors could do with their service workers to help them get to where you are today?

**ANGIE:** Sure.

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(1) I think that one of the things that really fired me up was getting personally involved with social service systems. For the first time I was eligible for benefits like food stamps, and while this was humbling, I learned how to support myself. I also learned how difficult those systems can be.

(2) I also had to come to terms with asking other people for help. There were things in life that were important to me that I had to find a new way to afford—such as organic vegetables and yoga. For these, I had to become part of a community and talk to people and tell my story and discover a different type of economy that moved beyond the common thought that this service costs this certain amount of money.

(3) I allowed this to translate to my work. I began to think of things solutions and resources in terms of “who do we know?” and “what relationships do we have?” instead of “how will we get the money for that,” or “we don’t have money for that project.”

**TODD:** So this is how coming to terms with a VISTA salary helped you to become a better community organizer, communicator, and advocate?

**ANGIE:** Yes. I was able to, as you said in the introduction, redefine poverty and reexamine expectations of abundance and resources.

**TODD:** What do you mean? Can you tell us a little about each of those?

**ANGIE:** Sure. For redefining poverty, it all started with a body of work we were studying by a sociologist named Dr. Phil Bartle. He defines poverty differently—as, yes, it involves money, but it also involves ignorance of availability of resources and skills to get things outside of the expected economic system. He also talked about value and other principles.

We had a VISTA team of 6 members, all living in poverty and we needed things like meeting space, movie tickets, and daily planners. We were very creative with finding these things, asking for and receiving free tickets for movies or ballgames. We developed one-on-one relationships with different facilities to have access to free meeting space. There’s a coffee shop downtown that became our Monday meeting space. We began to build community there. These kinds of things really became the center of our work. Things like this started to change the spirit of our work and it really alleviated the stress of not having money to do anything.

This directly leads to an expectation of abundance. When the limiting factors are not as strong anymore, we were able to have more creative ideas and dream bigger. We could get more things done. This, of course, as you can hear, directly impacts that idea of what resources are. Too many nonprofits and community leaders have money as their bottom line. A phrase that has become my mantra is that “if money is the answer to whether you should or can’t do something, then you’re asking the wrong question.” Human service and relationships can be priceless. Working with one of our community partners, they originally said “no” to a VISTA worker because it wasn’t money or direct service they would be receiving. We had a meeting about rethinking what resource is, and this opened up their eyes to redefining that word for them.

**TODD:** What then can managers and directors also do beyond the three things we mentioned before to help national service workers find the passion that you did?

**ANGIE:** I’ll give you two powerful things to do.

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(1) It's important to combine the management practices of what it means to have a volunteer and an employee. It takes a blended approach. Working with volunteers seems to be about active engagement of a person and really asking what is that person trying to get out of the experience? On the other hand, the employee side of it is about measurable objectives and getting the work done. Being a national service member, especially a VISTA, required that both of those perspectives be included.

(2) Second, sitting down with the national service member and truly connecting their term of service, whether it is 10 or 12 or nine or three month experience in a meaningful arc. By this, I mean really setting up a system so that the national service member has measurable ways to know what success is and what his or her challenges are.

**TODD:** Thank you, Angie. We're going to go to audience questions now. Because we have limited time, please focus on asking Angie questions about today's topic rather than sharing best practice and stories. Remember, if you have a question for Angie; state your name, organization, and location.

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This text serves as a reference for the Community Radio Show but it does not serve as an official transcript of the recording.