

# Strengthening Rural America

NEIGHBOR BY NEIGHBOR



*Points of Light Foundation & Volunteer Center National Network*

**Effective Practices in Neighboring and Other Innovative Volunteer Strategies**

## Neighboring Works!

In 1996, The Annie E. Casey Foundation challenged the Points of Light Foundation to expand our understanding of volunteering and explore the role it plays in transforming “tough” neighborhoods into connected and family-supportive places. The neighboring model came out of our exploration and is based on an empowerment and asset-based approach to engaging volunteers in under-resourced communities.

Neighboring was initially studied in urban settings, where levels of informal volunteering were already helping keep families afloat. Such informal volunteering has historically been a necessity in rural communities, too, exemplifying the “neighboring” concept put forth by the Points of Light Foundation.

The seven key concepts of neighboring are detailed on the last page of this booklet and provide a guide to understanding how neighboring can work in your community. A wealth of material on neighboring is also available online at: [www.PointsofLight.org/Neighboring](http://www.PointsofLight.org/Neighboring).

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# introduction

The image of rural America is one that speaks to the best of our culture. Our rural heritage was built on rugged individualism, hard work, and a strong sense of community. It's not surprising that those who live in rural communities are more likely to say they feel connected to their neighbors than urban residents.<sup>1</sup> The vast distances that separate rural residents from necessities like hospitals and other critical services have forged close bonds among friends and neighbors through many generations.

Today, rural areas face many unique challenges. Communities that once relied on agriculture and manufacturing jobs are feeling the pressures of a global economy and changing business practices. Small family farms are no longer the backbone of rural life. Young children often have a hard time finding constructive after school activities to take part in and can easily become involved in drugs, crime, or violence. Many grow up and leave town for education and better job opportunities, leaving an aging population that can easily become isolated in the wide-open spaces of many rural areas.

To address local issues, volunteer organizations and managers that serve rural residents are finding ways to respond to the unique needs of each community. This publication contains

effective practices from across the country that illustrates the resilience and strength of rural America and the diversity of solutions to be found. By highlighting the challenges and successes of rural projects like those included in this booklet, the Points of Light Foundation seeks to identify new ways to strengthen families and transform neighborhoods in the low-income areas of rural America.

From the Appalachian mountains of Ohio to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, from the tribal lands of Cass Lake, Minnesota to the plains of Oklahoma, these stories depict innovative programs that foster volunteering and engage rural residents to come together to meet the needs of their neighbors. Building on local assets and shared values, they have developed viable, strong communities where children and families can thrive.

The effective practices are presented in a structure that outlines the issues each community faced, how they used partnerships to aid neighbors, and some of the volunteer solutions local residents helped implement. Each practice includes the key elements of success highlighted as "Lessons Learned." We at the Points of Light Foundation hope you will find lessons among these pages that help you and your organization serve your neighbors more effectively.

<sup>1</sup>*Voices of Rural America National Survey*, Pew Partnership, October 2000.

# a place to call home

## Abingdon, Virginia

### The Community and its Challenges

Abingdon's historic downtown is on the National Register of Historic Places, featuring buildings that date back to the 1700s. As a tourist destination in southern Virginia, the historic district invites visitors to wander its shops and galleries, or stop by the arcade at the local mall. A large percentage of professionals live in the area, but outside the confines of the quaint downtown, low-income area residents face many hardships.

The rural south is particularly challenged with poverty. Of the 340 non-metropolitan counties that suffer from persistent poverty, 280 are in the south. Poverty around Abingdon is partially the result of the prospects for work being mostly minimum wage jobs that don't offer crucial benefits. Hunger is a serious problem among local families, as is access to medical care for many.

**Ecumenical Faith in Action (EFIA)** has been working to address problems in this part of Virginia since 1994. Supported by 20 churches, EFIA began with a start-up grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation so that they could provide care to homebound community members. EFIA programs grew as more of their volunteers got firsthand experience with the holes in the social safety net that affected the people they served.

### Meeting the Challenge

To feed hungry residents, EFIA began a volunteer-run food pantry in an old nursery building that had been donated to them. The response to the food pantry was great, and soon the building wasn't big enough for the program. A local hospital donated an old house to the food pantry, and the project moved into a larger space.

To meet the needs of local residents, many of whom lacked health coverage due to unemployment or low-paying jobs without benefits, Kathi Lowe, EFIA's Executive Director, collaborated with partner organizations to apply for a grant to provide medical care for their elderly population as a first step towards increasing health care access to the community. The grant was denied, but three days later, two doctors came to provide much-needed assistance. They were looking for a site for their mobile volunteer medical services. EFIA's food pantry had such a reputation in the area and had become such a fixture for low-income people that the doctors thought it a logical place to set up shop. They have been there once a week, every week, since 2002.

EFIA also helps improve access to medical care by linking local residents to a free medication program called the Pharmacy Connection, which provides nearly a thousand patients with free medication through the Virginia Healthcare Foundation.

### Developing Community Partnerships

The EFIA staff has a reputation in Virginia for their ability to increase services by collaborating with other churches, social service agencies, the court system, the health department, and local school systems. Every congregation member, every business, and every government agency in the area is a potential partner to help EFIA solve local problems.

"The secret is never saying 'no' to anything," says Lowe. EFIA has put donated computers to good use throughout their projects. They even accepted the gift of furniture from a funeral home that was updating its interior design.

Lowe credits her program's success to her volunteers' ability to see every person who walks through the door as being an important human being and treat them that way. There's always a coffee pot brewing at the food pantry, inviting people to sit and talk like they're among family.



## Leveraging Volunteer Assets

A key factor in EFIA's successful programs has been giving ownership of the project to volunteers. Having the food pantry in a permanent location has helped both those who serve there and those who are served feel like they're home. EFIA works hard to listen to volunteers and find a place using each one's unique talents.

Keeping volunteers engaged through EFIA means giving them a variety of things to do that use their gifts and talents in ways that accommodate their individual schedules. One EFIA volunteer goes to the post office and brings the mail to them every day. Another picks up the trash once a day and hauls it off.

One of the greatest challenges in running rural volunteer programs is answering the transportation needs of people who live far from the volunteer site or may not have reliable transportation options. The EFIA staff and the community benefit from one volunteer who coordinates the transportation needs among those served. The coordinator finds volunteers who can pick neighbors up and deliver them to medical and other important appointments, which can involve great distances.

In one month alone, EFIA volunteers drove 3,550 miles, gave 952 hours at the food pantry, and distributed 45,817 pounds of food to area residents.

By weaving the bits and pieces of neighbor's abilities together, EFIA creates the strong social fabric that keeps many local residents going.



## Lessons Learned:

The success of EFIA is founded upon the organization's ability to respond effectively to the unique needs of their community and use volunteering to address local issues. The connections built through responsive neighboring have helped residents live better, healthier lives.

- Build volunteer ownership of projects by being responsive to volunteer ideas, which will lead to dynamic and successful projects.
- Find volunteer-based solutions to overcome obstacles, such as transportation, which prevent people from volunteering or accessing services.
- Collaborate, viewing everyone as a potential partner.
- Capitalize on your success to build new programs and strengthen volunteer recruitment.

# revitalizing a small rural town

## Pekin, North Dakota

### The Community and its Challenges

Somebody once described the state of North Dakota as “a small town with very large blocks.” Despite the vastness of its landscape, North Dakotans have cultivated a strong sense of community connectedness. A tradition of service and resilience has been handed down through the generations of mostly Norwegian immigrants who settled this rural state long ago.

Communities cluster together in counties throughout the state. The former thriving agriculture base built on family farms is gone, replaced by large agribusinesses. Women no longer take part in whatever agricultural economy is left, as many have to travel far from home for jobs, often low paying, that offer health insurance for their families. Some families work two or three jobs just to make ends meet.

The once-thriving town of Pekin, ND, had begun to decline. The last school in town had closed and the town gradually lost most of its businesses except for a bar, a grain elevator, and an iris farm.

Pekin had an annual reunion celebration to bring people who'd moved away back to town to reconnect with their neighbors. These “Pekin Days” became less and less attended as the years went on. With the decline in the local population, residents realized that, in order to survive, they were going to have to take it upon themselves to revitalize their town.

In rural communities, a town that has a hospital becomes the “medical town,” with health care-related businesses setting up shop there. The town with the school becomes the “education town.” Pekin’s residents took a good look at their town and decided to build on its strength, the arts. Pekin could become the area’s “arts center.”

### Building on Local Assets

**The Nelson County Arts Council** brought the community together to come up with ideas for how to capitalize on its artistic elements. They decided to build on something well known locally—Pekin Days—and extend the weekend with an art show. In addition, they hoped that by becoming an arts center and building on local interest, they could revitalize their economy and attract new residents.

Over the years, the art show grew to attract artists from a five-state region. The Arts Council, its board, and its members discovered new ways to fulfill their mission. They organized wearable art fashion shows. For three years, they held “Ride-in-for-the-Arts,” which brought motorcycle riders from

all over the state into town to compete for titles like “most beautiful motorcycle” and to get them interested in art. The art show has grown so popular that there’s now a waiting list of artists seeking spots to showcase their work.

The revitalization of Pekin was based on the strength of community volunteers. Coming from all ages, all art specialties, and all professions, volunteers contribute to the arts community throughout the year. Funding is tight in Pekin, a community of less than 80 people. Volunteering is the single most important source of support. Many residents happily give sweat equity and pitch in when it



comes to projects like renovating the auditorium that houses the art show. Recently, volunteers provided 161 hours of work on the facility on a single day.

### Partnerships to Strengthen Community

The Arts Council turned to Cher Hersrud, of **The Resource Center** in Fargo, ND, for guidance on some of Pekin's volunteer and economic development initiatives. The Resource Center provides individual assistance to nonprofit organizations and rural communities in areas such as planning, project development, fundraising, and board training. Hersrud advised them on locating funding sources and helped them survey residents to see if there were other arts events that would pique their interest. The Arts Council quickly turned the survey findings into a range of new projects for residents of all ages.

Economic factors were a key driving force behind local residents' concerns. With more frequent visitors coming to see local arts events, the community began looking for new and different ways to make the town more full-service for visitors. The area attracts hunters and fishermen all year round, but they couldn't stay in Pekin due to a lack of hotel space, restaurants, and convenience stores.

Three local couples decided to come together and purchase an unused low-income housing building. After minor renovation, they turned it into a motel, the Prairie View Lodge. The lodge stays busy all year and has helped revive Pekin's economy.

The success of Pekin's arts projects has won the small town the Governor's Award for the Arts in 2000 and a U.S. Forest Service Community Spirit Award in 2004. Today, Pekin is part of a larger, statewide arts initiative called the

New Bohemia Project that seeks to be an umbrella organization for a network of North Dakota artists, retail centers, and galleries.

Nelson County Arts Council Executive Director Brenda Bjorlie credits Pekin's growth to the dedication of area volunteers joining together to create a future for their small town.

Bjorlie explained that local residents are proud to be part of bringing their town back to life, saying, "Pekin won't be one of those communities where people will say 'once there was a town there.'"

### Lessons learned:

Pekin, ND, discovered a local strength that residents had never realized was an asset: the arts. By listening to and actively involving the area's rural residents, the Arts Council could begin strengthening their economy in new and sustainable ways.

- Help identify community priorities to create a roadmap for future success.
- Build on local assets and empower the community to become part of the solution.
- Look outside your community for partners and be creative in defining what they can bring to your effort.
- Solicit fundraising ideas from volunteers, board members, students, and the community.

# building a community's financial future

Jay, Oklahoma

## The Community and its Challenges

The windswept plains of Oklahoma have fallen on hard times. It's a land where natural disasters like tornados historically bring neighbors together in a crisis. But in recent years, the northeast corner of the state has seen hard times as generations of family farms disappeared and no new jobs sprang up to replace them.

School is sacrificed to bill-paying, unemployment is high, and miles separate people from the services that could improve their lives. In the face of these challenges, the **Northeast Oklahoma Community Action Agency (NEOCAA)** looked for way to infuse dollars into its struggling community, build assets of low-income families, and get the community to help itself.

## Meeting the Challenge

In 2001, the organization began the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program to help local residents gain a more stable footing financially. Volunteers were needed to help implement the program locally, and NEOCAA realized they could use the 19 Head Start centers through which they disseminated other services in the area as a direct way to reach low-income families both for volunteers and prospective clients. Staff made presentations at the Head Start centers and signed up those willing to learn what they needed to help their neighbors at tax time.

With training from the IRS, VITA volunteers help neighbors apply for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which puts thousands of dollars each year into the hands of low-income families. EITC, a tax credit available for working families whose income is less than twice the federal poverty line, represents the largest single source of funding for low-income working families. Many taxpayers in northeast Oklahoma receive checks for several years retroactively, giving them a cash infusion that could be the largest amount of money they've ever received at one time in their lives.

"The VITA is a very upbeat project," says Diana Behm, Special Projects Manager of NEOCAA. "It's fun because people are so happy when they get a lot of money in their hands." However, she points out that none of this would be possible without volunteers who have the trust of local residents. People have to open their lives up when preparing their taxes, divulging information about their families and finances that can only be given to those who can be trusted with confidentiality.

## Developing Community Partnerships

Building local leaders who had the community trust was crucial to maintaining the VITA program. Key volunteers like Candy Watson grew into leaders by being given the support to make a difference. Through a coalition with businesses and H&R Block, Candy earned a certificate from the tax preparation powerhouse after the NEOCAA sent her to classes to expand her understanding of tax issues. In return, she and other volunteers who completed the training contributed at least 20 hours preparing residents' taxes during tax season that year.

NEOCCA has partnered with local businesses like Lowe's Hardware and set up VITA services in the company's employee break room. In return, Lowe's has donated overruns of paint and damaged stock to help with other projects the NEOCAA does in the community.



## Leveraging Volunteer Assets

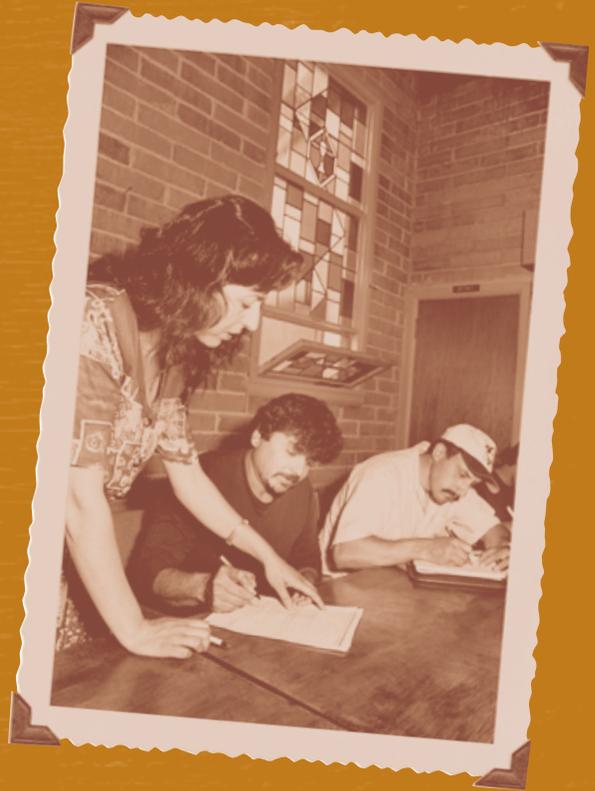
NEOCCA has used the talents and skills of local residents to the benefit of the three-county area it serves. In addition to free tax preparation assistance during tax season to help eligible residents access EITC, the organization's staff and volunteers spend all year long educating local residents. They inform community members on how they can build security for themselves with real assets like new home purchases, improving existing properties, pursuing higher education, and forging solid work histories.

Behm explains, "This income tax initiative is a crucial part of our service because you need to get the people ready for businesses to come and pay them a living wage. It's a chance to plug [community members] into educational programs and help them think about setting a goal for home ownership. We let them know that there's a home out there they can afford."

The volunteers who provide services through the VITA project gain real benefits too. The training they receive to do the tax preparation work is a job skill they can use to find gainful employment. In addition, they learn bedrock financial principles about savings plans, mortgages, and real estate. This kind of education attracts volunteers to the program and makes it easy to find the tax season recruits.

In 2003, the VITA program completed over 350 tax returns and brought back over half a million dollars in refunds that stimulated the local economy. In addition, NEOCAA has mentored and encouraged other agencies in Oklahoma to participate. Thanks to their outreach, over 2,800 returns were filed in other areas of the state that brought over \$3.5 million in refunds back to taxpayers statewide.

The VITA project proves that volunteers play an important role in strengthening families and a community's financial assets, which in turn can be the catalyst to improving the lives of local children and families anywhere.



## Lessons Learned:

The VITA program help improve local residents' chances for success because it focuses on the basic sources of problems facing the community: poverty and a lack of job opportunities. Through innovative community partnerships and outreach, the program engages volunteers to help build assets within the community that will make the area stronger.

- Provide meaningful incentives to volunteers, such as opportunities to develop marketable skills.
- Find ways to keep your volunteers engaged all year long so that they build connection to your program.
- Identify partners who could share in achieving the goals set out for your project and community.
- Reach out to volunteers and clients through existing networks.

# creating a miracle together

## Cass Lake, Minnesota

### The Community and its Challenges

Cass Lake sits within the Leech Lake Indian Reservation, home to the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe in northern Minnesota. The area is steeped in natural beauty with lakes, forests, and abundant wildlife. As the tribal headquarters, Cass Lake serves a mostly Native American population of about 3,000. Poverty affects Cass Lake as it does Native American populations nationwide, where 52% of the non-metropolitan areas in which Native Americans live, residents survive on incomes that are less than half of the federal poverty line.

Though only 12 miles from the university town of Bemidji, Cass Lake suffered from a lack of local businesses to provide jobs. The influx of large chain stores and easy access to larger towns via local highways led to the demise of small businesses in Cass Lake. The town's main street began to sprout vacant buildings. Poverty, alcoholism, teen pregnancy, drug use, domestic violence, and crime found fertile ground to take hold.

In 1995, a new city administrator brought community residents together with local stakeholders such as tribal representatives, law enforcement, and other government officials to work on finding ways to turn things around for Cass Lake. During the meeting, one resident exclaimed, "It will be a miracle if we can do this." A local reporter took that quote and used it to build an acronym that would hold meaning for the task force formed that night: "Moving Ideas & Relationships for the Advancement of Cass Lake's Economy," **The MIRACLE Group**.

The MIRACLE Group realized that the future of Cass Lake depended upon answering young people's needs. The volunteers organized two youth summits to listen to young people and find out what they needed to keep them from getting involved in crime. The answer was clear: the kids had nothing to do after school. They needed supervised recreation, increased guidance, and personal development. They would also one day need jobs, so building the economic base of the area had to be in the group's plans.

### Partnerships to Strengthen the Community

These new volunteer leaders of Cass Lake reached out to the **Minnesota Design Team**, a volunteer group of architects, landscape architects, urban designers, and other experts in design and community development who help communities create a new vision for their future.

The MIRACLE Group contacted the **Initiative Foundation** and became involved in their Healthy Communities Program (HCP). The HCP chose a core group of Cass Lake residents to attend leadership training. The prospective leaders took courses through the HCP in community development, effective team building, visioning, asset mapping, planning and project implementation, and sustainability.

One of the initial projects addressed the need to give Cass Lake's children somewhere to occupy them after school by creating a Boys & Girls Club in town. The Initiative Foundation provided them with a VISTA volunteer to organize the club's programming and get the project off the ground. Children of all ages pitched in to help renovate a local beauty shop and garage for their headquarters.

**The Boys & Girls Club of the Leech Lake Area** opened for service to young people 6-18 years old on January 4, 2000.

Now five years old, the club serves 80 percent of the young people in Cass Lake. In program year 2003-2004, the club served 501 area children. The club is proud of its mission: "to inspire and empower all young people to realize their full potential as caring, productive and responsible citizens."

## Leveraging Volunteer Assets

Teen volunteers at the Boys & Girls Club have become examples for other children by joining its Keystone Club, a service and leadership group. They tutor and mentor younger children while learning skills in six core areas: service to club and community, unity, free enterprise, social recreation, career and education development, and leadership skills. They have also supported neighbors in the community by participating in one-day events such as a “Just Play Day” to bring families together for recreation and encouragement to live healthier lifestyles.

**The Cass Lake Community Family Service Center** has also sought to improve conditions for area children. Since 1999, the Center has brought children in from the school district’s Alternative Learning Center to teach skills and give kids the opportunity to serve their neighbors. Children give their time to the local “food shelf” which provides donations of food to families facing hunger.

The Cass Lake Community Family Service Center and the MIRACLE group partnered with a spin-off volunteer group, **Community Voices Against Violence (CVAV)** on outreach to the community. Together, they launched a high visibility campaign to make area residents aware of the problems with violent crime and explore solutions together. They held peace rallies and brought State Senators, County Attorneys, judges and law enforcement personnel, and Tribal and County government officials together to brainstorm in panel discussions. Cass Lake area residents, many of whom were victims of crime, attended these meetings to express their opinions, along with area youth and schools.

CVAV, with the help of Midwest Community Policing Institute and the Center for Reducing Rural Violence, went on to conduct a community wide survey on crime and law enforcement and helped develop an action plan to address crime and violence in the community. The city showed a 35 percent drop in crime in 1999-2000, and in 2000, CVAV was a co-winner of the Minnesota Peace Prize with Mahnomen County on the White Earth Indian Reservation.



The determination of local volunteers to take back their community from the ravages of poverty and violent crime is what has helped build a more positive outlook for the future of Cass Lake. The Initiative Foundation’s 2004 Volunteer of the Year Randy Finn says, “They say ‘success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan.’ The more success we have the more people want to be a part of it.”

## Lessons Learned:

Residents of Cass Lake united during a turbulent time to seriously investigate issues that challenged the area’s young people. They volunteered their time and energy to benefit families and children in ways that continue to improve outcomes for everyone.

- Seek out community members who can keep a new initiative moving forward.
- Wherever possible, give volunteers leadership training so they have the skills necessary to inspire and lead others.
- Involve all community stakeholders to identify policy issues, and set an agenda to tackle key challenges.
- Identify and mobilize the existing assets and resources of a community first before looking to outside entities.

# forging a community hundreds of miles wide

## Eastern Plains Region, Colorado

### The Community and its Issues

The eastern plains of Colorado cover a third of the state and have thrived in the past from a rich agricultural base. Cattle graze in open fields. Leafy vines of melons cover the ground in the southern part of the state. But five years of drought hit the area hard, creating a huge economic disaster for communities throughout the area.

**Colorado Youth Corps** saw the need for a youth corps program to help young people get good job skills and bring value to their communities while also earning an AmeriCorps education grant and stipend for their service. They decided to launch a project called the Colorado Range Rider Youth Corps to offer young people a range of ways to serve their community by cleaning up prairie lands and improving local environments.

Jennifer Althaus, Associate Director of Colorado Youth Corps Association, says their first steps were to develop a local task force with individuals from key communities who were well-positioned and had important contacts on the ground.

The more their staff learned about various communities, the more they were able to address obstacles to volunteer recruitment and local buy-in. One of the most effective strategies they discovered was simply asking for personal referrals to local leaders. Asking, “if we were going to engage this community, who would we approach?”

Another hurdle to overcome was that the large swath comprising 15 counties didn’t view itself as “a community.” It became increasingly clear to the Youth Corps that an outsider couldn’t come in and run such a program without a background in rural Colorado culture.

### Developing Community Partners

Understanding the geographical affinities and invisible community boundaries, affiliations, and rivalries was crucial to making the Range Riders succeed. The Colorado Youth Corps Association listened to the communities involved and hired a local staff member for the Range Riders who was raised in a small town in the area and could connect with the Colorado residents. Yet even this local had to face the struggles of relationship building.



Rural communities want to see the proof that a program works locally before they will buy into the idea and support it. Actions speak louder than words to such rugged communities, so the Youth Corps staff spent considerable time preparing a foundation on which to build their project. It took 18 months to two years to set up the Youth Corps’ Colorado Range Riders program. With areas as vast as the Colorado plains and many distinct relationships to be managed, community leaders needed the extended schedule to make the face-to-face meetings that would be crucial to building the partnerships necessary.

To find potential Youth Corps members, the Range Rider staff worked closely with Workforce centers, the regional state Department of Labor one-stop shops that are central locations for people looking for work. They reached out to rotaries, high schools, community colleges, and churches to find recruits and partners.

Saving money was important to a program challenged by the need to travel great distances. Range Rider staff found cost savings by partnering with a hospital that could share their video conferencing capabilities, minimizing the difficulties of connecting people spread across the vast rural landscape.

## Meeting the Challenge

The Range Riders built their project on the understanding that rural communities, in contrast to urban areas, are more dependent on people power and the resources of the family to survive. Staff knew they had to get kids' input early and make their experience something unique to get them to commit to their program.

To that end, the Range Riders developed a series of conservation projects. Young people constructed or took apart fences where needed and built trails on the range in teams. They worked with the Division of Wildlife on areas that are used by naturalists for bird watching and wildlife viewing. The work the Range Riders do is intensive labor, but their teamwork gives them invaluable experience.

The changes made by the Colorado Range Riders throughout the eastern plains led many local residents to see that they had proven themselves. The program wasn't just something brought in by outsiders without any lasting benefits. With every conservation project completed, the program became more of an integral part of communities across the state. The word-of-mouth about their accomplishments was the only marketing needed to make local communities embrace the program.

In addition, local families could see that Youth Corps experiences are life changing and beneficial. Youth Corps allows young people to build individual self-esteem while also helping them learn the power of teamwork. Faced with the challenges of their service, many young people leave the program saying, "if I could do that I can do anything." Their brains stretch in new ways that come from experiential, not classroom, training. They also learn the basics of being a good employee: being punctual, reliable, and taking responsibility for learning the skills required for the job.

The Colorado Range Riders continue to improve the lives of youth and their families across the eastern plains of the state and build a strong foundation for the area's economic future.

## Lessons Learned:

Rural communities are very diverse, both in population and in cultural values. Range Riders' success is attributed to its investment in learning about community issues and engaging residents as leaders and volunteers at every stage.

- Discover barriers, internal rivalries, and boundaries between community members that might keep them from volunteering and find ways to overcome them.
- Hire local staff to give your project neighborhood credibility within the community you serve.
- Find ways to bring value to your community through increasing job skills and preparing low-income residents to succeed.
- Be prepared for managing great distances between your volunteers and sites for service through innovation and technology.



# healing a local environment

Trimble, Ohio

## The Community and Its Issues

Appalachian Ohio's countryside yields a range of different environments: fertile farmland, the steep hills and narrow streambeds of the central Appalachian area, and the rolling hills of the Ohio River Valley. Within the rich soil, the land held coal that was the backbone of the area's economy for decades. Acres of forests also attracted a lucrative timber industry for years.

Eventually, mining businesses left the area, but the environmental degradation they caused stayed behind. Acid drainage from abandoned mines polluted creeks throughout the region. So many streams turned orange from the acid, local school children painted them orange in their artwork. They'd never seen a clear running stream.

Poverty in this part of Ohio is profound. Morgan County has the highest unemployment rate in the state at over 16.5%. The state still hasn't rebounded from the loss of the coal and logging industry that caused serious environmental damage on Ohio's land, air, and water.

For years, **Rural Action** had tried to address the challenges left behind by the various extraction industries by fighting legislative and political battles. But realizing that these tactics weren't changing the region's essential economic or environmental landscape—or the lives of Ohio's struggling residents, Rural Action changed its strategy towards developing the area's assets in ways that would provide long-term solutions and jobs.

## Developing Community Partnerships

Rural Action brought together a wide range of local stakeholders and asked them what they would want their region to look like in 10 years, and what assets they had to help them get there. Together, the group determined that they needed to capitalize on their greatest asset, their beautiful natural environment. They saw that in order to have a strong healthy community, they also needed a strong healthy economy. That became the first part of their plan to address three key areas of concern in their communities: healthy economies, diverse environments, and strong social and cultural ties to the past. Thirty-three groups, including funders such as the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Commission on Religion in Appalachia, and the Campaign for Human Development, united to address the many crucial challenges of the area.

Their first plan of attack was to clean up Monday Creek, a body of water so polluted that the EPA had designated it the dirtiest creek in Ohio.

## Leveraging Volunteer Assets

With the aid of their partners, local resident volunteers leveraged funding and shared technical knowledge to complete projects on abandoned mine lands. Through their efforts, coal refuse piles were capped, treatment ponds were designed, and open limestone drainages were established.

The group's restoration efforts have extended far beyond impacts resulting from acid mine drainage. They have planted thousands of pine, oak, locust and other tree species on strip mine lands. They have gone on to remove tires, appliances, and household trash from streams, stabilized eroding stream banks with willow posts and tree plantings, and picked up litter along highways within their watershed.

Federal and state agency personnel, educators, scientists, and local volunteers contributed their time and talents. The service of neighbors resulted in a boon to the local economy, too. Every dollar spent on Monday Creek circulated through the community seven times in increased opportunities for businesses that provided services during the restoration project.



## Meeting the Challenge

The Monday Creek Restoration Project is just one of the many successes that Rural Action has achieved using three different types of volunteers as catalysts for community change:

- One-day event or project-based volunteers who can give only a limited amount of time to service;
- Advisory committees or boards comprised of community members who can contribute a monthly or quarterly commitment of time to provide leadership and local perspective; and
- VISTAs, national service members who serve America's poorest communities for one to two years.

With a range of service opportunities to offer volunteers, Rural Action could challenge each volunteer uniquely. One-day events to plant trees along stream banks introduced many new volunteers to the program. VISTA members led “train the trainer” workshops that helped give more experienced volunteers leadership skills. Rural Action also leveraged the special training of some VISTAs so that they could help replace some of the economic foundation that had been lost with more sustainable uses. They taught landowners to grow ginseng, goldenseal, and other medicinal herbs. Guided by advice from local volunteers, Rural Action worked to connect farmers with consumers and institutions to purchase their crops. These connections are crucial to keeping them farming and helping their businesses thrive.

Lastly, Rural Action's volunteers created a community mural project throughout their region that has become a collective expression of residents' pride, a source of learning, and a way to establish a positive local identity.

## Lessons Learned:

Rural Action recognized that healing the devastation wrought by the coal and timber industries in rural Ohio was a necessary first step toward strengthening the local community. Their long-ranging planning and responsiveness to their community has given residents hope and a healthier place to live.

- Listen to the innovative suggestions of your volunteers whose commitment can be the driving force for sustainable change.
- Find ways to attract volunteers to your projects through a range of service opportunities.
- Think holistically when looking at local challenges to find projects that address multiple community needs at the same time.
- Capitalize on the pride local residents have in their area and give them ways to express it.



# engaging parents as volunteers

Rio Grande Valley, Texas

## The Community and its Issues

Spread across the vastness of Texas's Rio Grande Valley, thousands of farm workers and their families live in communities called "colonias," mostly unincorporated settlements that often lack the basic service such as electricity and water. Many are spread out by large distances and aren't accessible by paved roads. The families who live there are mostly immigrants from Mexico, migrant workers who follow the harvests of crops across America for a living. Like many low-income families in Texas and many first generation immigrants, this struggling sector of society has become a real presence in the colonias and challenged neighborhoods in many border towns.

Given the fluidity of the migrant population, many families take their children out of school regularly to move them to the next site where they can find work. Such interruptions in a child's education invariably lead to being held back in school or dropping out entirely.

Finding a way to matriculate from year to year in school with their families are on the road is a huge obstacle for many migrant children in Texas. Without an education, these children fall into the family business of migrant farming or, worse, can get caught up in joining area gangs.

The poverty of the children's families is serious, with ninety percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Large numbers dropped out before graduation, leaving the next generation with the same educational loss as their parents.

## Meeting the Challenge

The University of Texas Pan American sought to address this problem across a wide swath of Texas's border communities and keep children in school so they could have a chance for higher education and a better way of life. The University applied to the federal Department of Education for a GEAR UP grant, which provides five years of support to states and partnerships that help prepare low-income students to succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP has a unique method of improving students' chances, by focusing on

meaningful parent and community collaboration plus shared responsibility.

GEAR UP has followed the same cohort of 7,000 children from 23 middle schools through their junior year in 16 high schools today. Through the program, children receive tutoring and mentoring, college preparatory and planning classes, and opportunities to explore a range of

different professions. Through a partnership with Achieva.com, a division of Kaplan K-12, students also have access to online study skills and a technology-based college preparatory program.

As they approach their last years in high school, GEAR UP students are offered pre-SAT classes to get them familiar with standardized exams. Along the way, the program promotes leadership development and self-esteem that can make all the difference for children who once struggled to keep up in school.

But before GEAR UP could really take hold in the Rio Grande Valley, its staff began investigating the challenges they would face in helping these children succeed. Support at home would be essential to having the tutoring and other



aids given to the children take root and improve their chances to achieve. With many parents being undocumented, there was great distrust to overcome. Just communicating what the program could do for their children became the first hurdle.

GEAR UP initially used “parent liaisons” to spread the word about their project, but when these volunteers came to the door, many parents wouldn’t answer because the liaisons were strangers. At times like those, the liaisons often left a door hanger telling the family that they had stopped by and wanted to talk to them about Las Platicas.

### **Leveraging Volunteer Assets**

To overcome this barrier, the GEAR UP grant funded the Las Platicas program to train “platicador(a)s”, or parent volunteers who would hold gatherings (platicas) in their neighborhoods to educate other parents about the value of GEAR UP.

One platicador was trained in each colonia so that the program could then be introduced to new parents by a familiar face. Once parents were learning about the program from each other, Las Platicas could develop a presence in the community and start helping children achieve by supporting their schoolwork at home.

Parent volunteers were given an awareness that college was truly within reach of their children, due to a piece of Texas legislation that guaranteed a chance to attend state universities for any child who had spent three years in a public school. The parent volunteers were then trained on college preparation, financial aid, and stress management. In addition, the parent volunteers received benefits, as they stayed involved with Las Platicas. The program offers self-sufficiency classes for them on passing the GED, learning English as a second language (ESL), keyboarding, and job skills.

The GEAR UP program and Las Platicas work hand-in-hand to give children from low-income neighborhoods and colonias in the Rio Grande Valley a new way to live and succeed in America.



### **Lessons Learned:**

The University of Texas Pan American discovered a serious local problem that could be solved and created a program that uniquely addressed its communities needs through parent involvement. Thanks to their foresight and expertise, young people in their neighborhood can use education to help them build more secure futures.

- Develop leaders in your community who can introduce your program neighbor-to-neighbor.
- Provide volunteers meaningful incentives that can improve their lives to increase investment in the program.
- Understand cultural and language barriers that keep people from getting involved so that you can design ways to overcome them.
- Publicize the benefits of your program and educate stakeholders to garner support within the community.

# neighboring: key concepts

Everyday across the country, whether it is through short-term projects or long-term community initiatives, individuals and organizations are working to improve the lives of low-income families and build stronger more connected communities through volunteering. The experiences of these pioneers affirm what the Points of Light Foundation has learned from our work in low-income communities: Volunteer programs and initiatives are most effective in strengthening families and communities when they view residents as assets and engage local communities as equal partners by empowering, mobilizing and building on the strengths of its people.

Based on our work, the Points of Light Foundation has identified the following seven strategies that individuals, organizations, and businesses can use as a guide to success in developing effective volunteer based programs and partnerships in challenged communities.

- **Understand the nature of volunteering in low-income communities** – Finding sustainable volunteer solutions to address the disconnection families face requires understanding the history and culture of the community and recognizing community members as experts. Learn and understand their language. The volunteering there is usually informal, often called “helping out,” “giving back,” or “neighboring,” and is not recognized or rewarded in any formal kind of way.
- **Overcome barriers to community involvement** – Carefully examine and address barriers to volunteering such as lack of income or time, financial resources, child care, transportation, feelings of low self-esteem, and negative perceptions of volunteering or of outside organizations. Cultural and language barriers also can hinder people’s ability to connect with their community.

- **Empower communities to help themselves** – Outsiders cannot be “parachuted” into community to rescue residents. Community members must be part of the planning and decision-making process. Ensure that residents take ownership for finding solutions and can see how their involvement solves real problems that they face every day.
- **Cultivate community members’ skills and talents** – Identify and translate the gifts that community members have and turn them into tangible tools that lead to accomplishing project goals. Build upon these assets to develop sustainable programs that work long-term.
- **Strengthen existing community leadership** – Recognize existing leaders in each community and help develop new ones. Local leaders are invaluable in building community trust and ensuring that local perspectives are considered and understood.
- **Acknowledge that neighboring is an exchange** – Find ways to reward all volunteers for their contributions in ways that make sense and have meaning to them. Constructive, meaningful incentives and tangible rewards such as educational assistance, meals, housing assistance, and opportunities to grow job skills encourage neighboring.
- **Ensure community readiness** – Take time to build relationships and cultivate involvement. Communities may need help resolving conflicts or problems that are preventing residents’ involvement. This process requires patience and flexibility, but the rewards are immeasurable.

Learn more about Neighboring at [www.PoinsofLight.org/Neighboring](http://www.PoinsofLight.org/Neighboring).

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The Points of Light Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to engaging more people and resources more effectively in volunteer service to help solve serious social problems. The organization collaborates and partners with community leaders to better recruit, manage, and encourage volunteers to effect real change. Through its programs, initiatives, and hundreds of Volunteer Centers around the country, the Points of Light Foundation supports activities focused on engaging the general public and specific volunteer segments—including workplace, family, youth, seniors, and faith-based communities, among others.

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