

# Public service still stirs the heart

*Veteran of Vista sees Clinton proposal restoring sense of passion, purpose*

By MICHAEL G. SIEVERS

This is an important spring for me. It's the 20th anniversary of my year in service to America, the one that provided the foundation for two decades of public service to my local communities.

The year was 1973. I was 25. I had traveled east for a training session in the nation's capital. I was about to become a Volunteer In Service To America: a Vista.

There is another reason that I am thinking about Vista in 1993: President Clinton's plan for a National Service Corps. His idea reminds me very much of the agency I served as a younger man; his inspiration has the same source: JFK's 1960 inaugural address. His goal is the mission that Vista has met since its inception in 1964: to serve our nation personally and productively, with passion and purpose.

My missive from Vista instructed me to appear at the National 4-H Center in Washington for three weeks of training beginning in mid-February. I arrived with limited possessions to a bunking assignment with three guys from a local inner-city neighborhood project called the Mission of Community Concern. They slept with knives under their pillows; I kept my naïveté to myself.

The days of training went quickly. The best of it was local visits to social service agencies and religious services; the worst of it was the food. Today, I remember three things vividly from that time: a Rhode Island friend named Peter Pare and his 1964 Chevelle; visiting desperately poor mothers in dark, depressing rooms; and when word

*Michael G. Sievers is a Northeast Portland writer and consultant in planning and solid waste management.*

arrived regarding my next stop.

Where one went on assignment was the news shared when training was complete. New friends were shipped to projects like the Washington Planning Workshop and University Legal Services in the District of Columbia, as well as Offender Aid & Restoration in Charlottesville, Va.

My destination was 45 miles up the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. It was a place called the Neighborhood Design Center in Baltimore. Led by a skilled political organizer named Doris Johnson, this local community design center was staffed with a dozen disparate spirits who brought the needed skills of urban design and social services to neighborhoods too poor to pay for them. The rented storefront on East Biddle Street on the edge of Mt. Vernon had a heart that pulsed with care and compassion.

This crew of architects, planners and social scientists welcomed a new set of skills: mine. I was trained in landscape architecture and ready for what \$200 per month could offer in the way of urban life.

The community I came to know as a Vista was called Mund. Wedged into an urban hardscape east of Greenmount and above North Avenues, its acronym meant Model Urban Neighborhood Demonstration. Mund was a project of the 1960s and the war on poverty's Office of Economic Opportunity. It was there that my heart found a home.

My work for Mund focused initially on the design and construction of a recycled playground carved from a portion of the asphalt that served the Oliver Cromwell Elementary School at Homewood Avenue and 22nd Street.

This project, designed with help from children at the school, combined the voluntary efforts of the Maryland National Guard, the city's Forestry Division and donors like the C&P Telephone Co. It consumed me. Twenty years later a model of it hangs on a basement wall in our Portland home.

When my Vista tour ended, the Mund board of directors offered me a staff job as a planner. I imagined something good just get-

ting better. The board owned a building six blocks from my third-floor apartment on Maryland Avenue in Charles Village. I could finally afford my rent of \$108 per month.

The ensuing months allowed me the opportunity to work on housing, health care and community education, and to learn to love the city I now called home. When not bicycling to Mund, I was falling hard for Baltimore's birds, the Orioles, coaching a Homewood Cub League hardball team called the Senators at the Clifton Park Bowl and playing city ball in the evenings on the courts across from Margaret Brent Elementary School at 26th and St. Paul.

My mates on those muggy nights never knew my name. To them I was John Hawlicek, a white guy who could run and shoot. If it was an appellation earned from hard-driving playground games when a voice would cut the air with: Give me Hawlicek.

My work with Mund ended the following winter when the return from a holiday revealed an office robbed of personal possessions. It was a signal; my time in the community was over. That spring I began a planning role with the city's public-works agency.

I remained in Baltimore until the summer of 1979, and through those years continued as a faithful volunteer of the Neighborhood Design Center. Today, when I consider my tour with Vista decades later, it is clear that what I believed in then remains my passion today: public service. Vista gave me a strong sense of place and an unwavering devotion to improving communities through a commitment to people and ideas.

Vista is where I and thousands of other volunteers got our starts. Today, it has 3,300 citizens serving more than 770 projects throughout the country. Vista is and has been our national service corps. Perhaps President Clinton should check the nation's institutional memory bank. There really is no need to reinvent the parts of our national government that work well. Vista is proof of that postulate.