

Making a Year of Civic Service a Rite of Passage

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, March 1, 2006

This past week I attended the funeral of a dear friend, Eli Segal, whom I met when he chaired President Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign. For that administration, Eli created AmeriCorps, a national youth service initiative built along the same lines as John Kennedy's Peace Corps. During the funeral service, attended by a mass of people whose lives Eli had shaped, several passages were read from his speeches. The idea coursing through was the importance of service to others—the theme of my friend's life. I jotted down one of the passages in my program:

Love doesn't die. People do. So when all that's left of me is love, give me away.

Eli's national work was based on the often rough, often luminous experiences of real lives. He thrived on knowing about people like Adam Johnson, 22, who graduated from the University of Virginia and moved to New York City for a year of service before pursuing medical school; or Shaunice Alston, 23, transferring to Howard University, who was encouraged by her sorority sister to do public service in Washington, DC as a way to become reacquainted with her hometown.

Youth leaders like Adam and Shaunice have put career and education plans on hold for one year to dedicate themselves, a setting where they can work for a better world. It may sound simplistic, but sometimes the most profound ideas are.

In recent years, helping create a better world has blossomed into a national movement for voluntary service. A leader of this movement is Alan Khazei, co-founder of City Year, which has the slogan "We're young enough to want to change the world and old enough to do it." Alan believes that "universal national service, more than any other single reform or program we could implement, would fundamentally change our society for the better. Service gets people involved at a young age so that they learn what's going on in a direct way. It turns on people's 'justice nerves,' because if you're exposed directly to a need instead of just reading about it, you want to do something."

Fueled by this passion for justice, in 1988 Alan founded the non-profit with his Harvard Law School roommate, Michael Brown. The two started with 50 young people in Boston; today, over 1,000 men and women, clad in bright, red Timberland jackets, gather in fifteen cities—from Seattle to Baton Rouge—to put their idealism to work. Since its founding, nearly 8,000 volunteers have provided almost 12 million hours of service, helping more than 840,000 children. The program is expanding across the globe; City Year South Africa was inaugurated in 2005 and is set to double this year to 200 members.

How do they do it? City Year “corps members,” age 17-24, spend a year addressing pressing community needs. They run after school programs, lead camps, teach AIDS prevention, rehabilitate public housing, and build playgrounds. In exchange, they receive a stipend and an educational award of \$4,725 from the Corporation for National Service.

From the start, Alan envisioned City Year as a model program to demonstrate the ideas and ideals of national service, then serve as a “think tank” to turn that model into nation-wide public policy. This vision crosses politics. In 1991, President Bush appointed Mr. Khazei to serve on the board of the Commission on National and Community Service. President Clinton fulfilled Alan’s dreams when City Year became the model for AmeriCorps in 1993. And, in his 2001 inaugural address, the second President Bush challenged all Americans to be: “responsible citizens, building communities of service and a nation of character.”

In Alan’s broad vision, a year of public service will be a civic rite of passage for young adults all over the world, and the most commonly asked question of someone coming of age will be “Where are you going to do your service year?” In return, he thinks volunteering should be a door to the American Dream. Why not a new GI bill rewarding volunteers with a service bond that they can apply to higher education, the down payment on a home, starting a small business or nonprofit, or an IRA for retirement security?

Change travels in ripples, not lines. Alan is a student of my dear friend Eli Segal. Looking at Alan Khazei’s impact, I can’t think of a better embodiment of that passage that moved me so much last week at Eli’s funeral: When all that’s left of me is love, give me away.