

Footsteps of Change with VISTA

By Alice Eley Jones

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I grew up in the small northeastern North Carolina port village of Murfreesboro. I belonged to that generation of post-World War II “baby boomers” who came of age in the prosperity and Cold War tensions of the 1950s. My life was simple enough. The days and nights of my youth revolved around my family, First Baptist Church, and Riverview School. My favorite activities were reading, cooking, and watching television. I had a black dog named Blackie and a white cat named Snowy, and I shared with my brothers and sisters a yellow parakeet called Chucky, as well as a black rabbit named Satan.

In the fifth grade, I discovered what slavery truly meant to the history of my African American ancestors. I also learned that there were laws created to deny me rights guaranteed to other Americans because of the color of my skin. For the first time in my life, I grew understandably fearful. Segregation stole the innocence of my youth.

Mr. Dudley Flood, my eighth-grade teacher, inspired my classmates and me to become well educated in order to improve the lives of our people. To do so would mean to follow in the footsteps of Booker T. Washington (college president, educator, and cofounder of the Rosenwald Schools project), George Washington Carver (educator and scientist), Mary McLeod Bethune (educator and political leader), and others who had worked to uplift black people. The goal represented a tall order for young lives, but it was necessary.

I became one of the first black students to attend the previously all-white Murfreesboro High School. Upon my graduation in 1968, the Reverend James A. Felton (local teacher and civil rights leader) invited me to join the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program at Shaw University in Raleigh.

My parents were understandably uneasy for me to become involved. It was a difficult time in North Carolina and in America. In the fall of 1968 I could vividly recall the recent and violent deaths of several civil rights leaders in our nation: President John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert; Medgar Evers, Mississippi leader of the NAACP; Malcolm X, former Nation of Islam civil rights leader; and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to name a few. Because of the controversy over civil rights, black churches were being bombed and burned. Riots had become commonplace on college campuses. Northern cities were engulfed in flames. And antiwar demonstrations and civil rights marches filled urban and small-town streets alike. However, I readily accepted Rev. Felton’s invitation and completed a year of service to my people and my country, and this contribution continues to influence my life.

VISTA Volunteers

In 1963 President John F. Kennedy spoke of a domestic (meaning inside the United States) volunteer program modeled after the newly established Peace Corps, which worked internationally. President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a “war on poverty” and signed the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The act created VISTA and fulfilled the dream of the recently assassinated President Kennedy.

I completed six weeks of in-service training in 1968 and lived on the Shaw University campus. I received training as a community organizer to serve as a liaison between poor communities and the government institutions created to assist them.

My first in-service field duty was to provide voter education information in south Raleigh, where many African Americans lived. Many of the people confided that the 1968 election was the first one in which they ever voted. Several were frightened and would go to their precincts (voting places) only if driven there by me or other volunteers. As a rule, VISTA volunteers were allowed to take voters to their polling places to vote but could not enter the buildings with them.

I educated community members on their civic responsibilities and civil rights. Community members, not the volunteers, assumed the leadership roles. At the end of my year of service, I could either retire from VISTA or be reassigned to a different community. The goal was to prepare community members to become leaders themselves.

Rocky Mount, in eastern North Carolina, became my permanent field assignment. My regional supervisor was Earl Stancell, based in Washington, D.C. My field supervisor was Thelma J. Miller, of Durham’s Foundation for Community Development. Together Thelma and I printed and dispensed community leaflets; organized community groups; recruited students who had dropped out of school into Job Corps, an employment training program; and organized day-care centers and senior citizen groups. We also acted as advisers to students at the black Booker T. Washington Senior High when they voted to boycott classes to protest the school’s proposed closing and merger with the white Rocky Mount Senior High.

I attended civil rights meetings where impassioned leaders demanded change and organized demonstrations. I was introduced to Eva Clayton, a civic leader and businesswoman, and Floyd McKissick, an attorney, civil rights leader, and businessman, in the Warren County pine forest slated to become the Soul City community. I attended meetings in Winston-Salem with Black Panthers (a militant, youthful civil rights group) and marched with Howard Fuller (director of the Foundation for Community Development), Ben Ruffin (a North Carolina college student leader), and Arch Foster (a staff member of the Foundation for Community Development) in Durham. I met national civil rights leaders Julian Bond, Golden Frinks, and Jesse Jackson at a Raleigh civil rights conference. I often found myself in the midst of the nearly constant civil unrest in Rocky Mount, Raleigh, and Durham.

In the summer of 1969, two Americans walked on the moon, and I took my first airplane flight. I had been selected to attend the national VISTA Volunteer Conference in Washington, D.C., as the representative from Shaw University. I was honored to meet many people from different backgrounds from across the nation who were dedicated to empowering fellow Americans through education and civic participation.

In the short span of a year, I marched for equality along with students from Shaw University, St. Augustine's College, North Carolina State University, North Carolina Central University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Marchers included high school students, children, the elderly, men, women, blacks, whites, and American Indians.

I grew accustomed to being stopped by local police officers, county sheriffs, and state patrol officers. I received threatening telephone calls, and my car was routinely followed. I rarely traveled alone or at night. I accepted that my telephone was tapped. The VISTA organization would provide an attorney if I were arrested, yet black lawyers in Rocky Mount, Raleigh, and Durham volunteered their services anyway. Though I came close several times, I was never arrested.

My most lasting impression from that year with VISTA remains the gratitude of the people whose communities I served. I also learned that to help those who are less fortunate than ourselves makes us good citizens. America needs the resources of all her people, and being a citizen of goodwill is the greatest gift we can give our youth, our nation, and ourselves.

Alice Eley Jones operates her history consulting business, *Historically Speaking*, as well as *Minnie Troy Publishers*, in her hometown of Murfreesboro. In 1969 Jones received the *Minnie Fuller Memorial Scholarship* for her outstanding work as a VISTA volunteer. Throughout her career, she has served in various capacities in the history field and has won numerous awards.