

Local VISTA workers help solve community problems

By Tom Hill

Of the Emerald

Groups trying to solve community problems are often long on enthusiasm but short on knowing how to proceed. Helping groups like these get started is the aim of the Lane County VISTA Project. VISTA stands for Volunteers In Service To America.

The VISTA office, located at the Eugene Family YMCA at 2055 Patterson St., is part of a federal program established in 1964 to combat poverty. Each VISTA worker serves for at least one year.

Lane County VISTA, one of 16 in Oregon and about 500 across the country, matches VISTA workers with public and private non-profit groups needing guidance. Kathy Ask, the project's director, said the VISTA workers' jobs are not to participate in the groups' actual projects, but to help the groups organize and implement their plans. The idea is to help the groups become self-sufficient, she said.

She compared the relationship to a parent with a child who does not know how to tie his or her shoelaces.

"It's a heck of a lot faster just to tie them yourself, but you don't want to do that all the time because you don't want to be tying their shoes for them when they're a teen-ager."

The temptation to become involved in the nuts and bolts of programs is strong and can decrease the VISTA workers' effectiveness, she said.

Idealism and energy are important for the workers, Ask said. They work at least 40 hours a week and are always considered on call, she said. In addition, they must be good communicators and listeners, must be well-organized, and above all, must be "people persons," she said.

And they should not be too concerned with getting rich, she said. The workers are paid \$405 a month.

Although a large part of her job involves dealing with mundane matters such as paperwork, Ask said the more enjoyable side is giving technical help to the program workers.

Ask said she is disappointed at dwindling budgets and fading support for the national VISTA program within the Reagan administration. The administration tried to phase out VISTA but the action was blocked by Congress, she said.

Even so, funding levels and the number of program workers have dropped recently. For example, 5,000 people applied for VISTA jobs in 1981, compared to a projected 2,500 for fiscal year 1987.

"It's frustrating," she said. "I think VISTA is one of the most cost-effective programs around."

The Lane County VISTA Project has an annual budget of about \$15,000, Ask said. Two people work in the office: Ask, a three-quarter-time employee, and a part-time clerical worker. If the office received more

funds, Ask said she would like her position to become full time and would like to extend VISTA services into rural areas such as Oakridge and the McKenzie River area.

Some examples of local groups and programs VISTA has worked with include:

- Senior Wheels: a transportation service for senior citizens in Cottage Grove.

- Organically Grown Inc.: a farmer's marketing cooperative in Eugene.

- The Patterson Pre-school Cooperative: a parent-run, day care center.

- The Lane County Relief Nursery: a month-old program that helps parents learn child-raising techniques to curb child abuse.

- Parents Anonymous: a discussion group for parents who have abused their children or fear they may.

- Womenspace: a shelter for battered women and their children that encourages the women to support themselves after they leave the shelter.

One point of agreement is that the VISTA worker's job is not simply to do things for people. The worker helping Womenspace, Pamlynn Pegg, said, "This is not a case where the VISTA (worker) comes in and solves people's problems for them."

Womenspace director Ann Tryk said, "We learned long ago that doing things for people does little for them" in the long run.

Pegg said one of her biggest

challenges is keeping the members of the group interested in contributing their efforts. "Everyone would like to do it, but they find reasons not to," she said. "They don't feel good enough about themselves to volunteer."

Pegg admitted the low pay workers receive sometimes causes financial problems, but said she never questions whether the job is worth it.

Lee Pettigrew, a VISTA

worker for Parents Anonymous, said many factors offset the low pay. Among these are job satisfaction, medical and dental benefits, the chance to learn about how the community works and the chance to help build a project from the ground up, Pettigrew said.

VISTA workers also receive federal job credit, which means they move to the top of the list for any federal job they are qualified for, she said.

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about why she identifies with witchcraft.

"I guess it's the sense that the world is being seen as alive. It was the sense of being an isolated kid in the country and I could go outside and feel like I was communing with whatever was out there," she says.

This connection to nature is at the heart of witchcraft, she says. Queen explains that many who call themselves witches say they could talk to animals who would approach. She admits there's no way to make it sound not trite, but the feeling that everything is interconnected and one makes anything possible.

"If I'm interconnected with the natural world, then yeah, I can communicate with things," she says.

"Witchcraft says everything is sacred, which is analogous to the Native American belief that the earth is sacred and holy," she says.

Queen says that because of this, many environmentalists are drawn to witchcraft.

"The highest calling of witchcraft is Earth because she's the goddess," Queen says. "You don't go around profaning God and you don't profane the goddess."

Queen says witches will often get together and focus on healing the world, on peace or on "stopping that nuclear power plant from going up."

Also, Queen says that many feminists are

drawn to witchcraft because the major religious image is the goddess. Women are able to get a "sense of validation" that is not available in other religions, like Christianity, where the ministry was all-male until recently, she says.

The large number of lesbians associated with witchcraft — one coven in Eugene is made up of all lesbians — is a somewhat recent development, Queen says.

"This is partly because only in the last 10 years has there been an organized gay and lesbian movement," she says.

She sees these tools as merely props but they are used as a means "to get down real far into the collective unconscious."

Queen now uses holy days like the summer and winter solstices to celebrate her religious community and devotion to the goddesses, but this wasn't always so.

"Before, I was real skeptical about all the spiritual-shit. I knew I liked everything I knew intellectually about witchcraft. But people dancing around the fire and singing to goddesses, come on!" she says.

"I finally decided to do it. There's no explaining it — I can go around and say I'm connected to the rest of the world, but it wasn't until I did the rituals that I felt it as a real presence," she says.

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