

GIVING SOMETHING BACK

ACTIVISM

A new wave of volunteerism goes beyond the self-centered motives of the past

BY PETER LA CHAPPELLE, *Daily Wildcat*, U. OF ARIZONA

Jennifer Ramo is a daughter of the 1980's me-generation — success-oriented, wealth-seeking poster children of the Reagan years. So what was the U. of Southern California student doing last spring bumping along the riot-torn streets of Los Angeles in a flat-bed pickup, while gun-carrying National Guard troops stood at attention around the perimeter of her campus?

"I'm a lot luckier than most people in the world, and I really feel like everyone deserves to be at a certain standard," Ramo says. "Everyone deserves decent health care, food, shelter and education."

Two days after the riot, Ramo and another USC student had coordinated the first of two food and clothing drives. The pair worked 20 hours delivering 17 truckloads of food and clothing donated by USC students and faculty.

Her payment? A thin film of grime that descended onto her flesh from the dark, smoke-filled sky.

Ramo, a senior anthropology major, and her fellow USC student, delivered relief supplies throughout the day to churches where hungry Los Angeles riot victims gathered.

"Everyone was nervous and uptight but smiling that I was there," she says.

Ramo and an increasing number of college students like her seem to be trading the "lazy college student" label for shovels, gloves and typewriters in their local communities.

And volunteer agencies say this group of student volunteers has its heart in the right place.

Take George Muñoz. The Pima Community College student, who studies social services, says he joined a federal volunteer organization to help members of the Hispanic community find work.

"I see myself as an advocate for the Hispanic community," says Muñoz, who works for Volunteers In Service to America (VISTA). "I hope I can make some impact in helping them to be successful in finding work."

Peace Corps records show that between January and April this year 15,601 college students returned tear cards from posters heralding the federal program. During the same months in 1991, the Peace Corps received 8,658 responses. In 1986, the number was 602.

VISTA reports close to a 4 percent increase in the number of recent college graduates compared to all volunteers in the last six months.

A federal program with more than 3,000 volunteers nationwide, VISTA has had enough interest from college students in recent years, prompting it to take a more active role in recruiting them.

"We've never had recruiters before this year," says Karry Douglas, a regional recruiter for VISTA, which helps organize the needy to improve the conditions of their own lives. "People heard about us through their friends or by reading about us."

Although VISTA and the Peace Corps pay their volunteers enough to live at the standard of the people with whom they work, even agencies that offer no compensation for students are noticing a jump in volunteers.

Ramo, who serves as recruitment coordinator for the USC Student Volunteer Center, says the center's participants increased from 300 last year to its current 1,000-volunteer total. The SVC helps connect students with about 250 agencies for service work.

Response from students during two Southern Cal for South Central drives was overwhelming, Ramo says. USC residence halls and Greek houses left piles of clothes and food during the "SC for SC" pickup. "People had bought food just for



A new drove of students is filling more than lines on résumés through volunteer work.

this," she says.

At the U. of California, Santa Barbara, students involved in the school's Community Action Board help other students find non-profit agencies that need volunteers and help campus organizations plan volunteer and charity projects.

Dulcie Sinn, the board's adviser, says the board has grown from 26 members to about 50 in the last few years. Board members are taught the basics of non-profit activism, and along with other student volunteers, help run a volunteer action center.

"I've noticed that a lot of students have been getting involved," says Nuh-Y Canh, co-chairwoman of the board.

Of course, the increased interest in helping others does not necessarily mean all these students pitch in because of sense of duty — volunteer jobs do look great on a résumé.

Canh says she, like many students, got involved in volunteer projects for personal gain. But in time, she says she developed a sense of duty and responsibility toward those whom she was helping.

Gloria Proo, who supervises three VISTA volunteers in a job placement program in south Tucson, Ariz., says all the VISTA volunteers with whom she has works seem genuinely interested in helping the community.

"They have a real strong commitment," she says. "There may be other people that inquire, but they never end up here."

Six of the nine Tucson VISTA recruits who have worked to help community members find jobs during the past three years were recent college graduates, Proo says. VISTA volunteers have worked with members of the largely Hispanic neighborhood, where 52 percent of residents make less than \$5,000 a year.

Cathleen M. Mullen, who graduated in 1986 with a bachelor's degree in psychology from Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, says she chose to work with the Tucson VISTA group because she wanted to see other parts of the nation and because she wanted to help people.

"For selfish reasons I chose to leave Maine, but for more altruistic reasons I chose to come here to help this community," Mullen says.

The three volunteers, who help the unemployed from a cramped office in the Pio Decimo neighborhood, say few students would volunteer for selfish concerns alone.

Continued on Page 36