

HOLLYDAY HOUSE: Washington's first settlement house

Lila Gardner, Peace Corps Volunteer, Philippines II, 1961-63

Because each community has different needs and issues, in a curious way the Adams Morgan and Shaw neighborhoods are like small towns with their own culture, demands, needs, and resources.

Communities do surprise us with their often hidden, untapped resources which is something Returned Peace Corps Volunteers are adept at spotting. They are a valuable resource in identifying problems and creating with others workable solutions.

The reality of community centers affecting social change and social justice for the greater good has a long history of success in the work that was done in the 1950s to the 1960s in Washington, D.C. at Hollyday House, 2316 17th Street, NW.

Let me share with you some of my own personal experiences of this most remarkable community center. You see, in 1961 I was one of those Peace Corps Volunteers who heeded Kennedy's call, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." Serving overseas I realized that we had much to learn from the host country that would help America.

Later Kennedy confided to Sargent Shriver that America would never be the same when these Peace Corps volunteers returned home — that this organization would change America — so it did and so it continues to do.

When I was interviewed for the position as the first paid director of Hollyday House I brought much of what I had learned in the Philippines to that interview and to the work I eventually accomplished.

Elinor Hayes, Hollyday House's board vice president, who interviewed me said that I was chosen out of a large number of applicants mainly because of my two years working in the Philippines as a Peace Corps volunteer. The Washington Post article quotes her choice of me for the job as: "We also liked her because she was a very idealistic young person interested in problems of urban communities and racial minorities."

The PC Volunteer newsletter of October 1964: "In the past, Hollyday House, established with the aims of lessening racial tension and bettering living conditions in the area, has usually been operated by older directors dealing mostly with the interests of young people."

Hollyday House had a remarkable Board of Directors who helped steer us and keep us on track financially and adhere to our bylaws. They were folks who cared about the community even though some of them did not live in the Adams Morgan area. They might have grown up there and moved elsewhere as adults. They always came to community gatherings but they also trusted my leadership and gave me free reign to develop programs after I had presented to them my specific goals. I kept them in the loop and they kept me in the loop—which is to say that we worked together well as a team. Some of them were outstanding community leaders in Washington, D.C. and had a long history of projects to improve conditions for the

people of the city, such as Florence Cornell, Charles Baltimore (Bell Vocational School principal) Thelma Dreis, and Elinor Hayes. There were a number of others and I am sorry I don't remember all their names. Hollyday House was lucky to have such a stellar group of civic-minded people to represent them out into the community and throughout the city.

In my work at Hollyday House I continued to focus on those ideas but I wanted to increase educational possibilities for both the young and the old in this community. We began by establishing a library in the basement for all ages. Children loved it!

The library was established by simply writing many publishers and asking them for donations. They responded generously by sending us boxes and boxes of new books for children.

After a new RPCV volunteer joined us, at his suggestion we mailed out press releases asking for volunteers for a wide range of activities like fundraising, job training, pre-school programs and various kinds of classes, athletics, music, study hall and tutoring sessions and this appeal went to community leaders, newspapers, and to newsletters where returning Volunteers would see them.

The response was nothing short of amazing! Coordinating volunteers into areas where they had expertise at the end of my first year, 1964, we had over 200 active volunteers with a range of skills, even a newscaster from Voice of America got interested and shared her skills speaking/writing/tutoring with students on Saturdays.

Hollyday House was alive with activity from the very beginning and we had a terrific response from kids getting involved in our outreach to their parents to engage them too. So, Parents' Night brought to Hollyday House some very hard core, poor parents who really wanted to help their children.

There were many surprises that emerged in our outreach efforts. One young RPCV who worked with the government named Jack Giddens, knocked on the door and told us that he'd seen a lot of activity at the House and wanted to know what this was all about. He soon became the team leader. He held several workshops, which taught adults/teens from the neighborhood how to fund-raise. He created a map of every household in the area.

Then, one Saturday we all started out and went door-to-door spreading the word about our programs for the community and asking for funds to keep us going. In nickels, dimes, and dollars they raised a very respectable amount—if memory serves, over \$1000. Our board was very surprised and impressed with the results.

While there is much more that I could say about the potential of Peace Corps House for helping communities revitalize, RPCVs can offer the skills and the experience to make this happen. RPCV Sally Irish did that for Hollyday House by creating one of the first HeadStart programs for preschool children. This program included not only language skills, knowledge of the world outside their community but meals and field trips, such as Hickory Hill for a "fun event" sponsored by the Kennedy family.

Other RPCVs came to help tutor on Saturdays and participate in our enrichment program, which took older children to museums, science fairs and other events in D.C.

Today's RPCVs would bring knowledge about the "tech" world and navigating social media, among other skills, which would make them a valuable resource in urban communities like Shaw.

Peace Corps House could thus be this generation's Hollyday House and a model for settlement houses in other communities in America.

Lila Gardner is a writer and oral historian living in Honolulu, Hawaii.